

DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

”The decline of the concept of objectivity in the fake news and post-truth era”

PhD student: Bogdan-George Radulescu

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This doctoral thesis approaches the concept of journalistic objectivity from the perspective of an applied ethic, an ethic of communication. Our goal was to identify those major causes that contributed to the decline of the concept of objectivity, as an ethical ideal and as a norm, both in everyday practice and in the academic debates about the validity of the concept itself.

We have made an inventory of the major definitions of objectivity proposed by essential studies that have appeared in recent years. With the help of this inventory of definitions and analyzes we aimed to find a common theoretical denominator with the help of which we can illuminate, with an almost pharmaceutical precision, the very essence of the concept of journalistic objectivity. Our goal was to eliminate a certain dramatic ambiguity that baffles ethicists and journalists when it comes to defining objectivity as a deontological ideal.

Supported by a solid bibliographic apparatus, we chose the multidisciplinary formula. We wanted to offer a "spectral analysis" of the concept of objectivity, made from several angles of theoretical interpretation. We've consulted the most important studies on the chosen topic: from theories in the area of epistemology and philosophy of language to media studies, from a history of cultural mentalities to the psychology of communication and ethics.

Starting from the most recent perspectives launched by these debates, we tried to detect the causes of this decline in objectivity: 1 / the complex landscape of definitions about journalistic objectivity; 2 / the philosophical and cultural causes that led to the phenomenon of the decline of the concept of objectivity; 3 / the psychology of the fake news consumer and the difficulty of detecting the meaning of objectivity / lack of objectivity in the received media message; 4 / identifying a set of procedures that can replace the mechanistic concept of objectivity, bringing to attention a complex of more precise, more operative notions and approaches, which will resurrect its ethical relevance and inaugural meaning.

The critical approach to the concept of objectivity in journalism came from multiple directions. One of them refers not so much to the insufficient theoretical precision of the norm of objectivity itself, but especially to the inability of media professionals to rigorously adapt their work to the standards assumed by this norm, incapacity determined by two inevitable factors: 1 / political beliefs and ideological views of journalists; 2 / political pressures exerted on journalists by the patronage of media corporations.

Another approach starts from a *critical philosophical perspective*. This approach, which is an epistemological critique, seriously calls into question the ability of journalists to accurately describe reality as it is. It expresses skepticism about the professional abilities of journalists to comply fully with what - from Plato to Western analytical philosophy - is generally referred to as the theory of correspondence. This theory assumes that, in the effort to capture and show the truth, the way in which a human being understands the world has a direct relationship, correspondence with the world as such, which exists outside the representation of the human mind.

Our understanding of reality must, therefore, correspond to reality itself. Analyzing from this point of view the concept of objectivity, some specialists in the philosophy of communication come to the conclusion that objectivity is an illusory norm, an intermediate concept, not an absolute one, implying a subjective re-construction of reality, not an accurate description of it.

Finally, another theoretical position is that which subsumes the debate about the objectivity from an ethical paradox perspective. The norm of objectivity is often made responsible for inducing in the journalist's conscience an extreme attitude of moral detachment and civic neutrality when confronting serious social or political problems of the community of which he is a part. There are situations that would demand, on the contrary, more engaging ethical and participative positions.

We addressed the issue of philosophical and cultural causes of declining objectivity. Before directly affecting the deontological sphere of journalism, this twilight manifests itself decisively in the area of epistemology and history of modern culture.

Through its nihilistic perspective, postmodernism encouraged moral relativism, probably starting from the premise that, thus, it could contribute to the expansion of tolerance towards otherness and to the pluralism of values in the social field. Its intrinsic nihilism, the inclination towards the deconstruction of the founding meta-narratives, as well as the expansion of moral and axiological relativism, irrigated the fertile ground of uncertainties and paradoxes on the field of ethical reflections on journalistic objectivity. Dealing with the influences of postmodernism and the causes that generated the emergence of the "post-truth era", we propose an x-ray of the impact they had on journalism, especially journalism diverted from the production of fake news.

The post-modern era and the post-truth era in the field of journalism have affected efforts to maintain the imperative of objectivity in the production of media content. The way of practicing journalism has undergone drastic transformations. Media policy and media coverage gain other values. Postmodernism coincides not only with media pluralism, but with a plurality of contradictory and cacophonous messages disseminated by the multitude of media channels. The multiplicity of media channels against the background of the phenomenon of globalization has offered companies around the world existential and stylistic

alternatives: more options in terms of lifestyle choices, opportunities for inventing new identities.

The decline of journalistic objectivity is not a recent phenomenon, however. As we speak today of globalization and digitalization - trends that have had a major impact on the media - in the modernity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the process of industrialization and democratization of societies greatly influenced the emergence of journalism as a paid profession, but also the appearance of a wide public consuming news and reports.

The central argument of postmodernism is that all aspects of modernity - politics, religion, science, philosophy, technology, history, education - have failed and have given rise, on a large scale, to resentment and agnosticism. This is not only about the idea of God, but also about the idea of human authority that is claimed from immutable principles. In this sense, the postmodern era is an agnostic era because postmodern theorists will rigorously question the notion that Modernity has raised to the rank of idols - Truth, Reality, Ultimate Explanation.

We also tried to configure **the internal, subjective conditions that predispose the receiver to ingesting distorted and dysfunctional media messages**. We set out to highlight the fact that the eclipse of the idea of journalistic objectivity is facilitated not only by the spirit of an era, by cultural and philosophical influences at a given time, but also becomes possible due to the psychology of the consumer of fake news. Such consumer abandons its cognitive demands and critical spirit. The question we wanted to answer in this chapter was the extent to which the media consumer, who has become the target of an unprecedented information bombardment in recent decades, has developed mechanisms of psychological conditioning against fake news.

Two dimensions of the human come to contribute to the relativization of the concept of objectivity: our *need for meaningful narratives*, which complement our individual gnoseological effort, and the imperative *need of human groups to have their collective situations clearly defined*. Sometimes, the imperative need for meaningful narratives is stronger than the need to establish the degree of truth (the degree of adequacy of the story to the facts) within these narratives.

The atomization in the virtual world of online content entails a dizzying decrease of the civic dimension, often manifested on the street, in groups and a loss of political sense and interest in the public good of the community. Sometimes, in the three-dimensional world of the street, civic acts can go so far as to assume the political dimension - so necessary - of protest and can remain linked to the Aristotelian hypostasis of *zoon politikón* concerned with the fate of the polis.

Virtual realities are defined by direct reference to a specific technological support involved, but especially to the description of special psychological states experienced by those who surf

the Internet. If there is a power of attractiveness of virtual universes, it consists in the possibility of rendering to the browser on the net a reality that loses its nature as a simple photographic image or representation of the imaginary, detached from the frames of reality, easily identifiable as fabricated. This virtual reality becomes, for the browser, a total environment.

The mental conditioning of individuals exposed to aggressive communication in the online environment prepares a human mass of receptors frustrated and outraged against social norms and who, moreover, live from the illusion of the possibility of perpetual contestation of any landmarks in real life. This human mass not only manifests an anomic character, but tends to become the ideal receptacle for post-truth visions.

Social media has become the ideal platform for distributing fake news. The very format of social networks is such that it allows the dissemination of concise messages, similar to headlines in mainstream media. The audience on social networks does not have time to verify the veracity of manipulative messages.

In this doctoral thesis we focused on **dismantling the technological and communication mechanisms that generate the distribution of fake news and the way in which they can be revealed and possibly blocked**. In this chapter we treat the subject of misinformation in an analytical manner. The idea we start from is that there is no perfect equivalence between information error and the fabrication of false news. What differentiates them is, in the final analysis, the manipulative intention. The misinformation to which public opinion is subjected through the systematic dissemination of false news involves knowingly misleading, and above all the deliberate intention to deceive the audience. This deliberate attitude of manipulating public opinion is based on an extremely effective IT tool, which leads us to believe that, at some point, one can only fight against technologically instrumented media manipulation through technology.

We wanted to capture two essential features of the fake news phenomenon. The first, and perhaps most important: the deliberate way in which false information is trafficked by fake news providers. Second, it has to do with the *imitationem veritas* regime, through which false news manage to go viral, namely the way in which *fake news manage to imitate the appearance and markers of the credibility* of authentic news sources.

In this chapter we aimed to highlight the fact that the digital media era has facilitated, among other things, the emergence of a phenomenon that transcends the strictly technological area of the use of artificial intelligence, to intersect with political dynamics. One of the strong topics discussed in recent years in the political sciences - a topic in direct connection with the phenomenon of fake news - is the emergence and manner of manifestation of populism.

The algorithms that underlie the technological functioning of digital media are not ideologically neutral, but are based on a certain social, political and economic conception that justifies their existence on the information market. These algorithms favor online competition

between dominant political narratives, which struggle to impose in front of the audience the status of a reference system in explaining social realities. Algorithms, by their cybernetic nature, predispose to the establishment of a sign of equality between the digital audience / the number of subscribers on a digital platform and popularity.

Algorithmic populism occurs mainly due to the fact that the logic of the algorithmic operation of online presence is extremely effective in building a large audience on the Internet, thus giving politicians with populist or extremist messages the justification that they speak on behalf of the people they claim to represent. Thus, a democratic mechanism is being replaced. Official public debates and the principle of fair political competition in classic election campaigns in which there is controversy and fighting between opponents is gradually being replaced by a fake online plebiscite.

In these conditions, the classic electoral process is flawed because it no longer respects the constitutive limits of legal electoral campaigns, monitored by secure public courts (electoral commissions, observance of fair play in media debates according to well-defined ethical and deontological norms), but it is based on the degree of intense emotionality of the moment following the distribution and redistribution on social platforms of manipulative messages or fake news that mislead the public, without it being possible to verify in time the credibility of such messages.

If we do not understand the political consequences of the relationship between the cyber logic of algorithms behind online platforms (often used perversely) and populist discourse, then we risk contributing, along with our enthusiasm as online communicators, to the degradation of genuine democratic communication.

Through **the case study**, presented in chapter seven of the doctoral thesis, we wanted to illustrate an extreme form of the eclipse of objectivity, as well as the procession of negative effects that it sets in motion, aspects related to what we have could call it the pathology of communication (fake news, manipulation of public opinion, black propaganda, political subversion). **We chose to illustrate a case of communication pathology in the area of international and strategic relations.**

The case study examines the fake news techniques used by Russia in various political destabilization campaigns in the West. To identify their mechanisms, we accessed the results of Western think tanks specialized in the analysis of Russian misinformation, in the field of international relations, defense, strategic communication and security studies: *The Disinformation Review*, *EuvsDisinfo*, *The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, *RAND Corporation*, *The Brookings Institution*. The efforts of these think tanks to analyze in depth the campaigns supported on social networks by the Kremlin, highlighted various objectives aimed at strengthening Russia's diplomatic and strategic position vis-à-vis Western democracies. The case study was developed from non-partisan positions. The only criterion of analysis that guided us in our research was academic impartiality.

We have proposed, programmatically, that our analysis on the concept of objectivity should not lead, in the end, to its complete emptying of meaning. On the contrary. We intended to reconstruct, at the end of the complete radiography of objectivity as a deontological norm, its lost meanings.

The panoply of old Soviet tactics to destabilize the West has regained its vigor and found a new expression under Vladimir Putin. Today's interest in Russia to continue in new, more insidious forms, the Soviet strategy of active measures (Russian *активные мероприятия*) is a vital one. A destabilized West will pay less attention to Moscow's political and geopolitical slippage, its military adventurism that blatantly violates the world's liberal international order.

The need to crack the solidarity of the states of the European Union and to undermine transatlantic relations (the United States and the European Union continue to act in solidarity with the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia for its militaristic adventure in Ukraine in violation of international law) determines the Kremlin and Russian services to adapt the set of active measures to the new realities. Old tools taken out of the closet of Soviet totalitarianism are now being reused by the oligarchy around Vladimir Putin.

In the case of Putin's regime, fake news is not just a form of false propaganda, giving legitimacy to the power of the former KGB colonel installed in the Kremlin, but they have become an extremely effective weapon in the information war against the West. False news, distributed globally through the classic media or social networks, is a sign of the Kremlin's obsessive pursuit of obtaining, in subversive ways, image and diplomatic advantages from what Russian analysts call the information war.

We mainly analyzed the types of fake news campaigns orchestrated by the Kremlin in order to impose false narratives about the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the occupation of eastern Ukraine, but also about the false narratives propagated by the Russian media about the Covid-19 pandemic.

In order to promote the image of a technologically competent state internationally and to renew the anti-Western media shooting, Russia has redoubled its efforts to disseminate false media narratives about the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) on both traditional media channels, as well as on social networks. As it articulated legends about the effectiveness of its own vaccine (Sputnik V), the Putin regime's propaganda machine intoxicated the global media with conspiracy theories, fake news, and various aberrant conceptions about the West's efforts to find medical solutions.

In concluding the case study, we've stated that the West would need to set up commissions with unquestionable epistemic authority, composed of psychologists, historians, sociologists and media and IT specialists, to dismantle Moscow's abusive references to European history. At the same time, it would be necessary to continue blocking the false content broadcast through disinformation campaigns orchestrated by the Kremlin. There is already a Facebook technology that is being used to de-radicalize right-wing extremists and Muslim jihadists. We believe that a similar initiative should be taken to block the Kremlin's propaganda.

At the end of the doctoral thesis, in **the chapter eight dedicated to the conclusions and directions of future research**, we've agreed that, despite the ethical and epistemological divergences beyond the concept, objectivity remains, now and in the future, the key to deeply democratic news media. It can reliably serve both traditional journalism and new models of journalism (multimedia, civic journalism, global journalism), including the most innovative news collection and analysis processes.

We've also concluded that, in the future, the application of complex ethical literacy programs for participants in social media - mediated communication should be intensified in educational institutions (often the technological performance of digital natives is counterbalanced by an ethical "illiteracy"). The social and political stakes of such an approach are serious and relate not only to the individual health of participants in the digital public sphere, but also to the communicative health in democratic structures and institutions.

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