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Post-truth, propaganda and the transformation of the spiral of silence

ABSTRACT

In 2016, post-truth was named word of the year. Since then a handful of texts have sought to further describe and explore the notion, moving beyond the initial definition given by the Oxford Dictionary. This article rejects the term 'post-truth', in favour of propaganda, since post-truth tends to be utilized as an evaluative term of contemporary political public discourse, as articulated by specific politicians, predominantly through social media. Taking the field of information management as its starting point, our approach underlines the diachronic character of persuasion efforts through information management, understood as propaganda in the public sphere. As a notion, propaganda, in contrast to post-truth, encapsulates both the diachronic character of information management in the public sphere and the ground-breaking transformation of the process of personal opinion expression, initially described by the spiral of silence model, through the emergence of new interactive media.

KEYWORDS

propaganda
persuasion
postmodernity
information
management
public sphere

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN MODERN SOCIETIES

Information is a reference point for contemporary societies (Poster 1990: 7). In quantitative (technical) terms, information constitutes the 'quantitative measure of communication exchange'. Thus information is whatever can be encoded and transmitted through a channel connecting a sender and a receiver, irrespective of its content (Roszak 1986: 11; Stonier in Webster 2006: 26). In qualitative (social) terms, information is 'one or more statements and/or facts perceived by a human being and having a certain value for the receiver' (Cox 2013: 61). Information is produced as the transmittable form of a message, while at the same time, the values contained in this message shape the information in social/qualitative terms (Losee 1988).

Information is at the epicentre of social structure (Bell 1978; Schiller 1984; Poster 1990; Castells 2004) since it conquers time and space, initially through its, mainly unilateral/analogue, broadcast and more recently through its – multilateral/interactive – digital dissemination (Terranova 2004), thus constituting a fundamental ingredient of contemporary political, cultural and financial activities. Contemporary western societies are 'information societies' since their information structures have become the basic sources of productivity and power. Instead of the commercialization of information, we now encounter the informationalization of commercialization (Demertzis 2017: 14). This is the result of the orientation of financial activity with respect to immaterial symbolic commodities (Lash and Urry 1996: 204–10) and new technological achievements (such as digital information networks) (Gleick 2011).

The most prevalent cultural effect of the network society is the ability that everyone potentially now has for customized interaction and access to information production and dissemination (Webster 2006; Tunstall 2008). Key players in this information frenzy are the mass media, whose values and ideology affect the public sphere (Fowler 2003). The mass media focus on specific issues and cultivate specific patterns of social behaviour (Luhmann 2000: 76–88). Following social constructivist accounts (Demertzis 2002; Christakis 2016: 11), mass media have been major actors in the formation of social reality (Thompson 1999: 7; Burr 2006). As Postman suggests: 'We don't see reality the way it is, but the way our languages are. Our languages are the media. The media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture' (1985: 14).

Through the evolution of audio-visual electronic media (radio, television) 'the conscience industry, hence the public opinion formation industry, has become the pacemaker of the socio-financial evolution of late/post-industrial societies' (Enzensberger 1981: 9). Information management is a basic characteristic of contemporary societies, one that defines the elaboration and dissemination of specific information mainly from professionals of communication management aimed at influencing public opinion in terms of politics, consumption and culture in specific ways (Kumar 2006; Webster 2006: 190).

Especially since the outbreak of Second World War (the first 'total war'), political and financial elites have been engaged in constant processes of negotiation with the mass media to control it and ensure that the media will promote their interests (Cull et al. 2003). Due to the prevalence of the mass media in the production and dissemination of information (e.g. advertisements, public relations, politics, business) (Webster 2006: 168), information is not merely the event that takes place outside of the media that is simply

reported by the media, but the event modified and (re)presented by the media (Mitu and Poulakidakos 2016).

Following such arguments, we conceptualize information management as a vital part of perception management. Perception management includes attempts to influence public opinion to align with specific interests (Siegel 2005). Understood in this manner and in these contexts, information becomes a specific means of (re)orienting power structures, a means for (re)constructing reality (Terranova 2004: 37). In operational terms, publicly disseminated information that serves to influence others with respect to their beliefs and/or actions constitutes propaganda (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013: 6), although it is worth bearing in mind that not everything that is widely disseminated in public lends itself to such analysis as a piece of propaganda (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013: 5).

DEFINING PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is defined through the application of four interdependent principles: the attempt to influence people's minds and behaviour; the efficient use of mass media; the understanding of the psychological condition of the intended/desired audience; and the exploitation of socially established behavioural patterns (Bernays 1928; Jowett and O' Donnell 2015). Propaganda makes (intense) use of emotions, drawing on sentimental factors, and seeks to persuade to serve the aims of the propagandist through disseminating a certain ideology or doctrine (Taylor 2004; Marková 2008; Poulakidakos and Armenakis 2014; Jowett and O' Donnell 2015). In addition, propaganda is a phenomenon adaptive to different social contexts (Jowett and O' Donnell 2015: 391); it is adaptive to the media it utilizes, trying to take advantage of their structure and operational culture to serve its purposes (Miotto 1953; Ellul 1973). Propaganda has been assisted in its development by the evolution of the media (The Economist 2016). The media form propaganda, whilst propaganda forms the media and modern societies (Pleios 2005).

In the contexts outlined above, it seems important that we should aim to recognize propaganda for what it actually is: a communication strategy (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013; Jowett and O' Donnell 2015: 389) and something that forms a part of our everyday life (Taylor 2003: 321). The interests of those implementing propagandistic strategies may align or be at odds with our own. When they align, we tend not to label this as propaganda; rather they serve to buttress our value system, our truth. In this vein, Taylor (2003: 321) argues that 'whether we will call a piece of information propaganda or not, depends on the side we are' and similarly Bernays (cited in Sproule 1997: 57) asserts that 'the information we believe in is education; the information we don't believe in is propaganda'.

Initially, the Catholic Church used the term propaganda in 1622 to denote the promotion of specific ideas (Severin and Tankard 2000). Later on, because of its massive implementation before and during First World War, its use by authoritarian regimes (e.g. the Nazis) and the prevalence of the American school of thought with respect to its description and definition, propaganda became closely related to dishonesty and as such acquired heavily negative connotations. Lies, deceit, manipulation, mind control and brainwashing have long been considered synonyms for propaganda (Levinson 1999: 39; Jowett and O' Donnell 2015). To focus on the communicative/functional aspect of propaganda (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013) and thus to approach it as a

1. As a socio-historical condition, modernity engulfs internal evolutions and discontinuities. The division of the different periods of modernity and late/modernity (early modernity, modernity, late/postmodernity) is subjected to wide debate among scholars. Hence, there are different periodizations of the post-traditional, post-medieval, period of modernity (see Harvey 1990; Hall and Gieben 1992).

method of public communication, we define it as a deliberate, mainly political, communication strategy, exercised through the dissemination of managed information via the mass media, aimed at influencing others with respect to their beliefs and/or actions.

PROPAGANDA AND THE MEDIA IN THE DIFFERENT PERIODS OF MODERNITY¹

During the financial, political and cultural contexts of early modernity, when coercion was the prevalent force for the implementation of the will of the divine right power and major financial interests, propaganda played a restricted role, being utilized mainly during wartime (Taylor 2003: 87–96), implemented through the dissemination of print media (e.g. leaflets, early forms of Press). During that time, propaganda played a complementary role to coercion policies since the use of (military) force against external and internal enemies of the established political and financial regimes was common practice (Thompson 1999: 91–92). With the emergence of liberal democracy, the utilization of propaganda practices has vastly increased (Zollman 2017: 1). Since modernity, the (political) elites have needed to utilize propaganda to legitimize their policies with respect to a more politicized audience (Pleios 2011: 95). The modernization of politics, through the generalization of political participation (Demertzis 2001; Christakis 2016: 25), has contributed to the generalization of propaganda.

During modernity, an array of new media came to the surface. Along with the Press, the emergence of cinema, radio and television (audio-visual media) gave new impetus to the application of propaganda across all different aspects of social activity. Cinema was widely used to propagate national, social and financial messages (McQuail 2010). Radio was similarly used for propagandistic purposes. Radio and related technological breakthroughs formed a new sphere of culture and entertainment, and thus practices and models of propaganda (Pleios 2005). The emergence of television and the gradual creation of a wide variety of entertainment and news programmes led to the radical development of new propagandistic strategies (Ramonet 2001: 142–43; Curtis 2003: 379; Keyes 2004: 176–77; McQuail in Curran and Gurevitch 2011).

The audio-visual media (cinema, radio, television) of the twentieth century disseminated information in a unilateral way – their discourse was an ‘unanswered’ one (Poster 1995: 17), a ‘language of command’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1986). Their ‘grammar’ enabled political and financial elites to control the content (Hanretty 2011: 46, 15–17), form the necessary conditions for the exercise of propaganda – aimed at imposing a top-down control of the public sphere (Habermas 1984: 372) – and widen the reach of propaganda messages (Jowett and O’Donnell 2015: 391).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a technological revolution occurred with the communication technologies as its epicentre (Castells 2000: 1). The Internet is the epitome of this information revolution. The new types of information flow and their personalized reception (Jowett and O’Donnell 2015: 391) have influenced the rationale for propaganda within this new informational space. The disaggregation of audiences alongside the complexity as to how content circulates via digital media has created new communication conditions (Nerone 2015). In the multifaceted web universe, propagandistic information cannot completely undermine opposing messages (McNair 2006: 9). In contrast to the ‘propaganda-exclusive’ media of modernity, the

late-modern Internet is a 'propaganda-inclusive' medium. In this sense, it encompasses the production and dissemination of multiple (propagandistic) messages/opinions, within a single but not homogeneous communication space (Soules 2015: 220), from various actors, although not necessarily through a hierarchical, top-down rationale (from the elites to the people).

In the contemporary digital world, the Internet's interactive character and the increased expression of personal subjective opinions lead to an increase in the level of subjective interpretation of the financial, political and cultural aspects of society (The Economist 2016; Uberti 2017; Martin 2017), a tendency towards a 'democratization' of communication (Bauman 1997; Kumar 2005). To use Niklas Luhmann's sociological terminology, society and Internet technology systems are 'structurally coupled' and 'interpenetrate each other' reflexively in this mutual dynamic process of co-construction and co-evolution (Demertzis and Tsekeris 2018: 1).

The participation of multiple – literally millions of – channels, websites and social media feeds (Harsin 2014) in the online communication and information 'ecology', in which any single user can openly express her/his own opinion on something (Gillmor 2004; Martin 2017) and send it to hundreds, thousands, even millions of others almost instantaneously (Jowett and O' Donnell 2015: 394), facilitates propaganda (Martin 2017).

Within this communication context, managed information, especially that intended to deceive, is one of the most prominent problematic issues (Weber 1995: 105; The Economist 2016; Uberti 2017). The difficulties of verifying information sources, alongside the widespread expression of personal opinions, suggest a new propaganda model that is expressed mainly through personal opinions, which seeks to spread as widely as possible (Poulakidakos 2014). Within the contexts, definitions and rationales outlined above, we are going to examine the notion of 'post-truth' and suggest that it actually constitutes propaganda since it combines diachronically exercised – by various actors – persuasion efforts in the public sphere and the adaptation of these efforts to the particular characteristics of the contemporary communication context.

POST-TRUTH OR PROPAGANDA?

The use of the term 'post-truth' increased by around 2000 per cent in 2016 compared to the year before. This spike in the usage of the term took place 'in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States' (Flood 2016; McComiskey 2017: 3; Speed and Mannion 2017). Since then, it has been closely associated with specific political figures, such as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Recep Erdogan and Vladimir Putin (Stratford 2017), signifying a rather negative trend in politics. This sudden and dramatic increase in the articulation of the term in the public sphere and its strongly negative connotations (Rabin-Havt and Media Matters for America 2016) are reminiscent of the similar outbreak of discussion and predominantly negative approaches concerning propaganda in the aftermath of First World War (Demertzis 2001: 28; Nimmo and Sanders 1981).

'Post-truth' is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as an adjective 'relating to, or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Flood 2016; Hodges 2017; McComiskey 2017: 5). Although the term 'post-truth' may have a recent pedigree, there is nothing at all new about populist discourse (Powell 2017), misinformation and even outright lies (Ball 2017), all of which

feature as constituent 'parts' of propagandistic discourse. If there is anything new with respect to this issue, it is the exponentially growing influence of the Internet, more specifically of social media and the World Wide Web (Rowe and Alexander 2017: 179).

With respect to its journalistic dimension, post-truth describes articles that constitute an assemblage of facts, information, rumours, statements, rumours of statements and officials' estimations and predictions of the future. Hence, post-truth signifies the existence of various degrees of truth (Triandafyllou 2017; Berghel 2017) that emerge and are shaped either by the intentions of journalists or by the institutional 'pressure' exercised on journalists by media organizations (Zollman 2017). Similarly, in post-truth politics, truth is of secondary importance. Feelings, not facts, are what matter in this sort of campaigning (The Economist 2016). In the post-truth world, language becomes purely strategic, without reference to anything other than itself (McComiskey 2017: 8); ethos and pathos function at the expense of logos, and become effective sources of arguments, since logos is actually denigrated (McComiskey 2017: 10–11, 20). This post-truth approach is directly equivalent to the approaches of propaganda. It describes an attempt to strategically influence public opinion in favour of that desired by the producer and disseminator of managed information, doing so through the use of specific discursive practices (opinions over facts, emotions over rationalism, half-truth or even lies – e.g. fake news [Harsin 2015; Oremus 2016; Hofseth 2017; Berghel 2017]) instead of research, rumours instead of cross-checked information.

These practices are not at all new in the articulation of public discourse and the diachronic attempts of propagandists to influence public opinion (Keyes 2004; Soules 2015: 208–10; Corner 2017: 1100; Lilleker 2017; Rowe and Alexander 2017). As illustrated by the previous theoretical discussion, propaganda – the attempt to influence the opinion and behaviour of the public, through the management of publicly disseminated information – is a strategy used by several actors (political or not) since ancient times, and in a systematic way, at least since the early twentieth century (Taylor 2003).

Propaganda is closely connected to the century-long development of professional political communication that, as a response to the modernization of politics, has, in both democratic and totalitarian regimes, conceived of the mass of citizens as risks to be managed (Keyes 2004; Harsin 2006, 2015: 331). As with propaganda, which, due to its historical use by totalitarian regimes acquired negative connotations, the term post-truth incorporates an inherent negativism due to its emergence in the public sphere following the propagandistic campaigns of Trump and those political representatives who campaigned for Brexit. Hence, the very use of the term post-truth – as with that of its predecessor, propaganda- has been propagandistic in nature. This foregrounds the need to always bear in mind that the term propaganda and its contemporary equivalent, post-truth, denote a struggle between ideologically different sides for the hearts and minds of the people (Snow and Taylor 2009).

These similarities, discussed above, as to the definitions and descriptions of 'post-truth' and 'propaganda' lead us to the conclusion that in its predominantly political implementation, when utilized to influence specific social groups, 'post-truth' is actually propaganda for two main reasons. First, the term 'post-truth' signifies a distantiating between the current public communication contexts and the truth, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, while also implying at the same time that in past periods or social contexts truth was the prevalent or even the only trend in public communication

(Powell 2017: 724). This contradicts scientific and real-life evidence (some of this research has been briefly presented in this article) that the broadcast and dissemination of managed information in the public sphere has been a widely used method of influence, exercised – with different qualitative and quantitative parameters- diachronically and systematically, at least since the early twentieth century. Second, the ‘democratization’ of communication, especially with the emergence of social media, has enabled every Internet user to express his or her own opinion on any given issue. This quantitative pluralism makes it possible for the information circulating the web to be committed to a wide range of political ideologies, religions and cults, conspiracy theories, art movements, etc (Pleios 2011: 156). Within such a communication context, propaganda functions not only as a top-down procedure, a communication strategy directed from the elites to the masses, but rather as a mix of top-down and grassroots (between users) dissemination of managed or personal-subjective information (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013: 9), while still having as its central aim to influence the perceptions of various publics on certain issues of public interest. This happens due to the fact that people tend both to believe that which already fits with their ideological orientation (Triandafyllou 2017) and to share their opinions either with people they agree with (McComiskey 2017) or with people they seek to influence.

In other words, propaganda, and operating through traditional unilateral communication channels, is nowadays exercised within the digital, decentralized, not exclusively hierarchical regarding production and dissemination of information context of the Internet, especially that of social media. In this respect, the social media communication context actually operationalizes more so than ever before, Philip Taylor’s claim that ‘we are all in fact propagandists to varying degrees, just as we are all victims of propaganda’ (Taylor 2003: 2).

This emerging ‘democratization’ of communication, alongside the increased expression of personal subjective opinions, has influenced both inter-personal and mass communication. It has transformed possibilities such that each individual can decide to openly express his or her opinion on a given issue. In what follows below the transformation of Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) theory of the spiral of silence, which explores the reasons behind public participation and non-participation in mass communication, brought about in significant part by the interactive communication context of the Internet and the social media, is explored.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

The dissemination of information through online media has changed the way people obtain information nowadays. Traditional journalism used to be the only source of information accessible to a large audience, but new sources have emerged as anyone can now provide information in a digital (quasi) public space. User-generated content (UGC) in the shape of blogs or on social network sites (SNS), and content contributed by actors deeply dependent on the wide dissemination of their messages (e.g. political parties, non-governmental organizations, social institutions, companies), complements mass media content in both online media outlets and in legacy media such as print and electronic media (Porten-Cheé and Eilders 2014: 143; Fox and Warber 2015; Zerbak and Fawzi 2017). The quantitative expansion of content is also related to an increase in opinion diversity since every additional user-generated item may present a unique perspective not yet provided or addressed by the mass

media (Gerhards and Schäfer 2010; Dylko and McCluskey 2012). The more easily people can put together distinct media diets through such opportunities, the more likely they are to find opinions that match their own perspectives, and they may even lose touch with the issues and opinions being discussed by society at large (Porten-Cheé and Eilders 2014: 143).

The emergence of the Internet has brought about an interactive, non-linear, non-pyramidal (non-hierarchical) communication process. The 'atomized' and 'democratized' (in quantitative terms) Internet communication context and the multiplicity of information media have resulted in an increase in the expression of personal, subjective opinions and interpretations of reality. Opinion expression is central to social interactions on social media: certain attributes of a post, for instance, can encourage or discourage further participation and expressions of opinion (Pang et al. 2016: 898).

The causal relation between exposure to particular media content and opinion expression in public is the theoretical backbone of the concept of the spiral of silence, put forward by Noelle-Neumann (1974) in her theory of public opinion. According to the spiral of silence, the perception of the opinion climate guides people's communicative behaviour in the public sphere (Noelle-Neumann 1974; Miyata et al. 2015; Luo et al. 2016; Liu et al. 2017). The spiral of silence theory proposes that individuals are likely to speak out in public if they perceive themselves to be in the present or future majority on an issue. In a complementary manner, when they perceive themselves to belong to the minority, people – afraid of being socially isolated – are much less likely to express their opinion openly. To assess the climate of opinion, people closely monitor their social environment via the mass media. Since the opinion perceived as a majority opinion is expressed in public and the opinion perceived as a minority opinion is not expressed in public, a spiralling process is initiated, in which the alleged majority opinion gains ground and the alleged minority opinion loses ground (Gearhart and Zhang 2014; Fox and Warber 2015; Soffer and Gordoni 2018). The spiral of silence mechanism explains how micro-level individual behaviour, such as speaking out in public under particular conditions, might spill over to the macro-level of public opinion formation (Porten-Cheé and Eilders 2014: 144).

The spiral of silence and the 'democratization' of communication do not refer to the same communication 'level'. The former focuses on an internal decision-making process conducted by a person before deciding whether he or she is going to openly express her opinion, while the latter describes a media context containing a multiplicity of openly expressed opinions. These two 'dimensions', though, are closely connected since mass media content has an inevitable effect on people's perception of the opinion climate (Porten-Cheé and Eilders 2014: 144).

Especially in the personalized communication context of social media, where the personal is interwoven with the public more than ever before, an individual's assessment as to whether he or she should express her/his opinion in public is more important than ever. On the one hand, we encounter a constant even instant application of the internal decision-making procedure of the spiral of silence model. On the other, due to the wide variety of interests and opinions publicly expressed, the individual usually does not feel the same level of 'oppression' by the dominant majority opinion as he or she will probably find other people with similar beliefs, opinions and interpretations to their own. Thus, each individual undertakes the decision-making procedure described by the spiral of silence, without – in most cases – having the

same level of fear of possible social exclusion, the main negative consequence described by the spiral of silence. The opinion-inclusive ecology of the Internet and social media diminishes the fear of social exclusion and thus serves to release the self-expressing potential of individuals online.

Thus, with respect to more (quantitatively) pluralistic communication environments, where a greater variety of publicly expressed opinions can be found, the spiral of silence dynamic is 'reduced'. In more 'traditional', centrally controlled, communication environments with one-way, top-down information broadcast, a lesser range of opinions, sometimes limited to a single opinion, are available in the public sphere, thus negatively influencing the likely public expression of a wider range of opinion. In this way, propaganda, especially online, is considerably influenced by the 'democratization' of communication, serving to diminish the censoring effect of the spiral of silence.

Among the most characteristic examples of this 'weakening' of the dynamics of the spiral of silence, within the interactive communication environment, is the open discussion and wide dissemination of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are appealing because they offer simple explanations for complex phenomena – especially in times of social unrest (Prooijen and Douglas 2017), or because they let people believe that they are in possession of secret knowledge that the powerful wish to suppress (The Data Team 2017). Conspiracy theories are not restricted to the online world (Prooijen and Douglas 2017) and their online dissemination is as old as the Internet itself: the crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996 sparked numerous alternative accounts of the plane's demise and the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 marked a milestone in terms of the development and widespread dissemination of unproven rumours with respect to speculation as to the perpetrators of the attack. More recently, the chemtrails theory, the anti-vaccination movement and the flat-earth theory, due to their expansive discussion in online communities (Bratich 2004; Clarke 2007; The Data Team 2017; Pappas 2018; Yenko 2018), have even hit the mainstream media, and in several cases have been transformed into offline activities.²

It is also the case that the Internet and more specifically social media has repeatedly served as a means for organizing and communicating with respect to grass-roots social movements, which oppose mainstream elite political discourse. During the uprisings across the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, the role played by social media can be viewed in terms of both a battleground for information freedom and freedom of expression and as a coordinating mechanism for political mobilization. The use of social media can facilitate efficiencies in internal organization, or else displace the need for formal structures of coordination altogether (Axford 2018: 21). Of the online activism that took place across MENA countries in 2011, it is suggested that the use of social media greatly increased the ability of social movements and protesters to coordinate across borders and to link up with other organizations (Axford 2011).

These examples, provided with respect to conspiracy theories and social movements – presented here as characteristic but not exclusive examples – prove that the interactive communication environment and the subsequent 'democratization' of communication provide the chance for the supporters of any marginal position (in terms of the ability to access the mainstream media) to connect with others, form communities, consolidate their argumentation, organize their communication strategy and disseminate their beliefs to claim their ground in the (digital) public sphere and through doing so to propagate their doctrines and try to influence the wider public.

2. On 9 November 2017, 500 'flat-Earthers' assembled in North Carolina for the first annual *Flat Earth International Conference*, while data from Google Trends show that in the past two years, searches for 'flat earth' have more than tripled (The Data Team 2017).

These examples stand as characteristic of the 'both-and' rationale (Beck 2009) that permeates the online world, especially in the age of Web 2.0+. The fusion of different kinds of media traditional and new ones in the interactive digital space creates a much more complicated context for human communication and politics, having both positive and negative attributes at the same time. Living in the age of 'both-and' implies simultaneity, hybridity, pluralism, multiplicity, connectivity, networking, inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism, contingency, uncertainty and, maybe above all, ambivalence and doubt (Demertzis and Tsekeris 2018: 4).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our approach to the notion of post-truth, through consideration of conceptions of information management and propaganda, illustrates that post-truth can be understood as propaganda exercised mainly, but not exclusively, within and adapted to the contemporary, interactive, multi-dimensional, communication context. Post-truth is identical to propaganda since it seeks to influence public opinion using specific, diachronically implemented, discursive practices. It can be located, predominantly, in public political – although not necessarily coming from politicians – and journalistic discourse. Coincidentally, its recent scrutiny can be seen as emerging from specific political communication events that, for us, resonate strongly with the kind of political events that originally triggered significant research on propaganda, about a century ago.

Propaganda, particularly with respect to its exercise through social media and the Internet, is intensely based on subjective interpretations of reality. Hence it may originate through a multiplicity of communicators within the new media communication milieu and it needs to stand its ground – if needed – against the immediate controls on 'truthfulness' conducted on behalf of fact-checking organizations (Poynter Institute 2018) and individuals. In this context, post-truth is a communication strategy that, at its core, remains identical to propaganda and – just like propaganda – seeks to adapt itself to the peculiarities and antagonisms of the new media communication environment to retain its capacity for significant influence.

What this article suggests is that a thorough examination of propaganda should endeavour to remove any positive or negative connotation and focus on the actual construction and dissemination of a specific discursive strategy (Taylor 2003; Auerbach and Costronovo 2013) through the use of any specific discursive or non-discursive practices aimed at influencing various publics (either offline or online). Studying what Wittgenstein called 'language games' requires, first, a focus on the interrogation of different discursive constructions of truth (Hodges 2017) and, second, a focus on their causes and aims since propaganda is not a fragmented method, but rather a constant procedure designed for the continuous guidance of public opinion in line with the interests of the propagandists. Under this rationale, it seeks to create a specific context; a perception of reality through managed and disseminated information (Poulakidakos 2014).

The study of propaganda remains highly relevant and will continue to be a critical issue in the future. The very emergence of new terms such as 'post-truth' and 'fake news', even though they actually describe old phenomena, indicates the wide interest of societies in the study of public communication and propaganda strategies. We upload and watch, we read and post, we google and are spammed, becoming relays within and across these networks in ways that blur

the distinction between the production and the consumption of information. To the extent that ordinary citizens are caught up by and occupy fields of mass persuasion, propaganda matters and will continue to matter (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013). We should not neglect, though, that despite the proliferation of newer technologies of knowledge, there still exist asymmetries in the ability to manage and disseminate information of public interest.

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