The phenomenon of post-truth:

A literature review on its causes, characteristics and consequences

O fenômeno da pós-verdade:

Uma revisão de literatura sobre suas causas, características e consequências

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Introduction

The expression "post-truth" is definitely included in everyday vocabulary: in the media, in schools, in work environments, even in family conversations. It has also become increasingly present in the scientific production of various areas, in journal articles and congresses. It had been used for some years, but became popular in 2016 when it was chosen as "word of the year" by the Oxford Dictionary and became directly related to two extremely important facts for world politics – the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States and the victory of the plan for the UK's exit from the European Union, known by the acronym Brexit (abbreviation for Britain exit).

For some, the use of this expression to designate the current moment is something inappropriate, only a fad, because it would only be a new name for an old phenomenon, and its use would be disregarding everything that has already been produced and thought about it. However, for those effectively dedicated to the study of the phenomenon, it is, rather, a new process marked by certain specific characteristics and which would therefore require own categories of analysis.

Other times, the expression is taken as synonymous with fake news. But they don't equal each other. As Aparici and García Martín (2019, p. 09) point out, "the differentiation between the concepts of post-truth and fake news is fundamental, fake news dimensions that must be taken separately".

Undoing these confusions is essential, which leads us to the search for a precise definition of what comes to be "post-truth". According to Santaella (2019), the term "post-truth" had already been used by Steve Tesich in 1992 in his analysis of the Gulf War, and was present in the title of a book for the first time in Ralph Keyes' work published in 2004. But it was in 2016 that the expression was intensively used, to the point of being considered as the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary, designating the "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in the formation of public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (SANTAELLA, 2019, p. 7). This definition involves, however, a number of aspects and levels of problems, and several researchers, from various areas and countries, have been dedicated to studying and correlating these various aspects and levels. The aim of this article is to present a systematization of the works of these authors, organizing knowledge in three axes: the causes of the phenomenon, its characteristics and some of its consequences or implications. The work is part of a postdoctoral research carried out at the Universidad de Salamanca in Spain, and, for this reason, favors the use of Spanish or translated authors in Spain. For the selection of books and authors used in the discussion were considered the actuality of the discussion, the fact that they are works dedicated entirely to the question of post-truth or some other phenomenon directly linked to post-truth, as well as the conceptual quality of the discussion undertaken and its originality (they were considered authors who treated for the first time an aspect or phenomenon).

The causes of the post-truth phenomenon

What is now called the expression "post-truth" is related to a conjunction of various facts or phenomena that have been happening for decades (or that have always accompanied humanity in some cases), but which have related or interacted in a certain way only in recent years. As mcintyre put it, the post-truth did not come before, she "waited for the perfect storm that would have other factors such as extreme partisan bias and the social media 'silos' that emerged in the early 2000s" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 68).

McIntyre devoted himself to the study of the factors that led to post-truth and pointed out five, which happened in parallel. The first of these factors is scientific denialism. It is a phenomenon in which the authority of science began to be questioned by ordinary people, in a process motivated by economic interests of certain business and corporate groups. The origin of this process occurred in the 1950s, in the United States, when several scientific studies began to associate smoking with

cancer. Tobacco industry business groups then created the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to fund "scientists" who demonstrated otherwise that there was no conclusive evidence of the harm caused by smoking. The main objective was not to invalidate the conclusions of the scientists of that time, but to sow doubt with the public, to generate confusion. In a classic study on the subject, Oreskes and Conway explain that, for this committee, doubt was their product. The authors point out that, from then on, the strategy was used by various business and political actors in relation to other topics such as nuclear winter, acid rain, the hole in the Ozone layer and global warming.

The second factor is the so-called cognitive bias, or confirmation bias, or cognitive dissonance, of the human being. It is a tendency of the human being to form his beliefs and worldviews without relying on reason and evidence, that is, on facts, in an effort to avoid psychic discontent. McIntyre points to three classic studies in social psychology conducted in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s that demonstrated this issue. The first is Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, according to which we seek harmony between our beliefs and actions. The second is Asch's theory of social conformity, which postulates that we tend to give in to social pressure because of our desire to be in harmony with others. The third is the study of confirmation bias conducted by Watson, who identified our tendency to give more weight to the information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs. The author also presents recent studies on the issue, expressed in two concepts: counterproductive effect (phenomenon in which the presentation of a true information to a person, which conflicts with their beliefs in false facts, causes the person to believe in these facts even more forcefully) and the Dunning-Kruger effect (a phenomenon in which our lack of ability to do something causes us to overestimate our real abilities). Such elements of cognitive bias make people prone to form their beliefs without taking into account reason and evidence.

The third factor is the drop in importance of traditional media. This phenomenon occurred, first, with the drop of attention and monitoring by people to the mass media, to the detriment of the monitoring of news and information through social networks, in a phenomenon known as deintermediation. The profusion of opinion-based content, often from people without any knowledge of the subject, is also related to this process. Secondly, with the emergence and expansion of the party media, especially the far right, less concerned with the facts and more focused on ideological engagement of audiences through the emotional. And thirdly, with the obsession, on the part of some media outlets, with an "ideal of objectivity" that led her to promote false equivalence: "to

suggest that two points of view have equal value, when it is obvious that one of them is closer to the truth than the other. Strategy used to avoid accusations of partisan bias" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 179).

The fourth factor is the pinnacle of social networks. Social networks have become the privileged environment from which people receive news and information from the world. And they are constructed from algorithms that select what people probably want or what agrees with their point of view, in a phenomenon known as the "bubble effect." Another issue is the existence of social networks in which messages are fired en masse directly to people's devices, without being able to monitor or oppose them, in an "underground" logic of dissemination of information.

Finally, the fifth factor is the relativization of truth promoted by postmodernism. The postmodernist movement developed throughout the 20th century as an artistic, cultural and also philosophical movement. Among its characteristics is the questioning of the idea of the existence of an absolute, unique truth, that is, there would not be an absolutely correct answer about what each element of reality means. The denunciation that any statement of truth would be an authoritarian act, because always ideological, ended up being a criticism hijacked by political movements to say that everything would be ideological and therefore there would be no "truth", only "alternative facts".

Kakutani (2019) also performed an analysis of the factors that led to the post-truth phenomenon. Some of the factors pointed out by her coincide with those listed by McIntyre. But it adds others such as the fall or devaluation of reason (a certain disdain for reason, the appreciation of the "wisdom of the mob", that is, of ordinary people, to the detriment of specialists); cultural wars (from counterculture, the new left and the postmodern movement, with a populist appropriation by the extreme right consecrating the idea of subjectivity, ending the idea of consensus) ; the culture of narcissism ("*moi* culture", idea that all truths would be partial); the very disappearance of the truth (promoted by compulsive lies spoken by populist leaders and considered to be truer than true arguments); attention deficit (people who do not read the texts but only the news, do not pay attention to authorship, giving strength to apocryphal information – which favors the performance of *trolls*); the so-called "hoses of falsehood" (mass hate propaganda campaigns mobilizing large groups to act irrationally).

The characteristics of post-truth

In Santaella's assessment, post-truth is basically structured by two processes. The first is the formation of "bubbles" or "echo chambers", in which users are isolated, closed to new ideas,

subjects and important information, especially in politics, and end up exposing themselves "almost exclusively to unilateral views within the broader political spectrum" (SANTAELLA, 2019, p. 15). The second is the spread of fake news. Although this is not new in the history of humanity, the new fact is the absence of regulations such as those that affect journalistic institutions, in a logic in which all information would have the same weight or value, regardless of its quality, its checking and the institutional commitment behind its production.

The post-truth relates to the gigantic dissemination of false information, which is acting to shape people's decision-making in different spheres (in politics, in the economy, in health education, in religion), in speed and quantity never seen before. But it doesn't end, then, its meaning. The new phenomenon is the fact that today, people in general (except, of course, a portion of the world population without the economic conditions for this) have easy and instant access to technologies and possibilities to verify the veracity of information, through smartphones, notebooks, desktops or other devices. Unlike other periods in history, when it would be difficult or impossible to check whether information, for example, about the way of life of a distant country was true or false, currently from home and in a few seconds, one can check. But people don't do that. They accept as real, pass on, share and appropriate information without worrying about verifying. It is this disdain, this disinterest in truth, in a reality with so much access to information, that is the new fact that the expression "post-truth" seeks to encompass.

Post-truth designates, therefore, a condition, a context, in which attitudes of disinterest and even contempt for truth are naturalized, disseminated, become everyday, normal, and even stimulated. It is this characteristic that would allow one to speak of a "post-truth culture". Initially, therefore, it is necessary to understand what it means to understand post-truth as a "culture". Of course, there is a dimension of the phenomenon that is technological. Digital technologies have decisively changed people's relationship with information. Among these changes is pervasive information, that is, information as a process present in all our activities, whether professional, business, cultural, educational, sports, medical, loving, etc., in an unprecedented way or on a scale, related to devices or devices as different as computers, cell phones, houses, cars or objects, even related to the emergence of the so-called internet of things. Linked to this is the phenomenon known as big data, which relates not only to the production, on an increasingly gigantic scale, of information, and the impact of this information on our lives, but also to the very way information is produced. This phenomenon is related to the fact that, increasingly, there are data sets generated unintentionally,

unscheduled, by people. There is also the very logic of operation of search engines and social networks, using certain criteria and causing certain effects (which will be analyzed below). All these are important dimensions related to the problem, that is, they end up acting for the creation of an "environment conducive to the proliferation of fake news, confusion, lack of confidence" (SANTAELLA, 2019, p. 33).

There are these factors, but they are allied to the disinterest in the truth, disinterest that exists, is accepted, is naturalized, stimulated, is reproduced. There is a process of acceptance and replication of concepts that normalize disdain for truth. And it's this dimension that means that, to a large extent, the issue of post-truth is a human problem, it is a problem related to mentalities, attitudes, an *ethos,* a culture: the post-truth "is an idea, an imaginary, a set of social representations or meanings already incorporated by audiences and from which it is possible the existence of fake *news* that refers to this idea affirming or expanding" (MUROLO, 2019, p. 68). This view shifts the issue of the individual level – it is not only individual decisions, idiosyncratic choices, but there is also a set of practices, habits, situations and speeches that promotes, directly or indirectly, a certain relationship of people with information and truth.

Wilber (2018) is a researcher who analyzes the phenomenon in a book with the suggestive title of "Trump and the post-truth". It starts from the election of Donald Trump for president of the United States and Britain's departure from the European Union, two phenomena directly associated with the triumph of false information massively produced, disseminated and consumed, and which guided people's decisions at a given time of voting, and associates them with others, such as diminishing the appreciation of democracy, the rise of hatred , racism, xenophobia, bad taste, among others. And with this it frames the post-truth within a broad process of changing cultural values in the world – and especially in Western societies.

Wilber makes a comprehensive reading of values and ideas in a position of leadership or acceptance in the world (what he calls "vanguards"). He identifies that, in the first half of the twentieth century, the world was led, in the various political, cultural and intellectual movements, by values associated with the rational, the operational, the conscious, the ideas of merit, profit, progress – that is, directly related to the ideal of modernity. In his analysis, he considers that, after the 1960s, ideas associated with postmodern values such as the defense of plurality, relativism, self-realization, inclusion, multiculturalism, civil rights, sustainability, the defense of minorities, among others, would

be in force. And, following the analysis, Wilber points out that in the second decade of the 21st century, a crisis of this project, a failure of the progressive vanguards, was taking place.

Wilber points out several factors that would have caused this failure. Among them, the relativization of the idea of truth, the idea that there would be local, particular truths, which has lead to a form of widespread narcissism; the inability to take the perspective of the other, the loss of the feeling of empathy, hatred against minority views, leading to essentialist views, with tendencies to racism, patriarchy, misogyny; and a crisis of legitimacy of modern institutions, human rights, reason, science, democracy.

Along the same lines, but in a more specific focus, Keen (2008) identifies what he calls the "cult of amateurism", a certain celebration of amateur content that ends up nullifying the distinction between the professional and the amateur, which leads to the weakening of newspapers, magazines, music industry, film and journalistic, with the consequent disappearance of professional and editorial standards and the praise of plagiarism and piracy. Another analysis in the same vein is that of Frankfurt (2019) which identifies the predominance of what it calls "bullshit": a form of dialogue that, unlike the hoax and the lie, represents a disrespect to the truth, a contempt, in forms of presumptuous, abusive and deceitful language, discourses that seek to disguise the ignorance of those who produce them and deceive those who listen. The growth of "bullshit" in advertising, politics and several other environments would be promoting skepticism about objective truth, since, unlike the liar who still has the truth as a reference (even if to deny or hide it), in small talk the truth becomes irrelevant.

Readings similar to that of Wilber, Keen and Frankfurt are carried out by other researchers who, however, emphasize less the cultural issue and more the political issue. In these cases, reading is less about people who act spontaneously for the exarcebation of post-truth and more about those who act planning, taking advantage of this situation. In these analyses, the intense circulation of false information and people's disinterest in truth become an aspect, an instrument, of a larger phenomenon, of a political nature.

Still on the characteristics of post-truth, there are authors who seek to understand how its functioning is operated. Dissecating the strategies of post-truth, Aparici and García Martín (2019) present the following manifestations of the phenomenon:

a) clickbait: insertion of sensationalized titles for users to access the content, with the aim of generating traffic and having benefits with advertising;

b) sponsored content: issuing advertising to look like informational content;

c) satire: use of fictitious parody content with the intention that people take the information as correct;

d) partisan content: partial interpretations of reality masked by the appearance of neutrality;

e) conspiracy theories: based on stories that try, in a simple way, to explain complex realities as a response to fear and uncertainty;

f) pseudoscience: denial of scientifically proven facts through partial and interested interpretations;

g) misinformation: merges real facts and false content, such as false attribution of authorship or image;

h) fake news: entirely false and inventedcontent, manufactured and propagated deliberately to deceive people with political and economic purposes.

The authors also point out the main strategies of post-truth in terms of language: use of metonymy, manipulation of statements, polarization through stereotype, decontextualization, saturation of content, modification of the meaning of words, use of phrases made, presentation of apparent facts, empty and exaggerated arguments, omission of facts, adulation, degrading aggregates and different opinions according to the circumstances. And they also highlight one last factor, what they call cyborg politics, that is, the use of robots to automate the circulation and popularization of certain information and even for its creation: "The automated dissemination of content on social networks, through bots, especially in the context of major political and electoral events, is increasingly frequent, and came to be one fifth of the conversations recorded on Twitter in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States" (APARICI; GARCÍA MARTIN, 2019, p. 127).

Santaella (2019, p. 33) presents three major sets of problems in which post-truth content manifests itself: deliberately false content, misleading messages that are not necessarily false, and memes that are neither true nor false, but produce negative or incorrect impressions. It also points out other conditions for the occurrence of the phenomenon, such as the fact that social networks cause more bubble effect than search engines, or the importance of popularity, about which studies show that false information is more likely to be disseminated than the real one. The totalitarian and impoverishing performance of the experience of the individuals was also verified and characterized by Noble (2018).

The consequences of post-truth

The most consistent analyses of the post-truth phenomenon are those that link it to a particular contemporary political phenomenon, associated with the weakening of democracy and the rise of demagogue leaders with authoritarian tendencies and who make constant use of *fake news,* taking advantage of the climate of devaluation of the truth.

This is the case, for example, of Eatwell and Goodwin's (2019) analysis of what they call the phenomenon of "nationalpopulism": the rise of demagogic leaders who build their popularity with the use of lies and appeals to emotions of hatred, fear and resentment among groups that feel they are no longer represented by political, economic and intellectual elites. The authors identify the four keywords that explain this phenomenon: the distrust of politicians and democratic institutions, the fear of the destruction of communities and historical identity, the fear of deprivation with globalization and the misalignment between traditional parties and the people.

In the work organized by Geiselberger (2017), researchers from several countries call the current political moment "the great setback", verifying the rise of authoritarian demagogues, "anarchic deglobalization", identity movements, xenophobia and hate crimes as protagonists of a scenario in which far-right groups would be taking power in several countries. Other similar readings are those of Casara (2019) who understands the current era as "post-democratic" and Serrano Ojeda (2019) who calls it "society of ignorance". There is also the definition of these consequences as the establishment of a "post-truth regime", an expression advocated by Broncano (2019) to designate the current moment, borrowing the notion of "regime of truth" in Foucault, that is, the set of knowledge, devices, actors, norms that generate categorizations, frameworks and conditions for the thinking and action of the subjects.

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States is often taken as a paradigmatic event of this trend, since

> Trump's problem was twofold, for his policies and his personality. It was likely that his economic nationalism would make things worse, rather than improve them for those who supported him, while his open preference for strong and authoritarian men, to the detriment of democratic allies, promised to destabilize the international order. With respect to his personality, it was hard to imagine anyone less appropriate to be president of the United States. He completely lacked the virtues associated with leadership (integrity, reliability, good judgment, devotion to the public interest, and unquestionable moral conduct) (FUKUYAMA, 2019, p. 12).

For Fukuyama, Trump represents a general trend of international politics that he calls a era of resentment. According to the author, "other contemporary leaders who can be included in this category are Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jaroslaw Kaczynsi in Poland and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines" (FUKUYAMA, 2019, p. 12, our translation). Eatwell and Goodwin (2019) add to this list the president-elect of Brazil, in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro.

During the Trump campaign, there were newspapers that devoted themselves to telling the number of lies That Trump had said in one day: 'Yesterday was 17, today it was 15.' A study on this conducted by politifact website even identified the falsehood of about 50% of its claims (!) (WILBER, 2018, p. 44). Similar diagnosis is raised by Kakutani:

> Trump, the number forty-five president of the United States, lies so prolificly and at such a speed that The Washington Post calculated that during his first year in office he may have issued 2,140 statements that contained falsehoods or misconceptions: an average of 5.9 per day. , are no more than the red light that warns their constant attacks on democratic norms and institutions. It attacks without ceasing the press, the judicial system and the officials who make the government work" (KAKUTANI, 2019, p. 14).

The author points out that the fact that a villain like Trump, "narcissistic, liar, ignorant and full of prejudices, rude, demagogue and tyrannical impulses" had such great popular support "is only explained by the disgust, the tiredness that exists on the issue of truth" (KAKUTANI, 2019, p. 16).

In fact, the success of authoritarian leaders and the emergence of forms of government based on mass dissemination of false information is both a cause and a consequence of post-truth, as they create a "perfect environment for the proliferation of Fake News (NF), motivated by interests aimed at manipulating attitudes, opinions, and actions. When confusion and lack of confidence in the sources are installed, the doors are open for disinformation to take over" (SANTAELLA, 2019, p. 33).

Among the dangerous consequences of the validity of the post-truth phenomenon, Kakutani (2018) resumes the arguments of Hannah Arendt, who argues that the ideal subject for a totalitarian government is one for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, ceases to exist. For her, therefore, the ultimate danger of post-truth is the consolidation of populism and fundamentalism, which, through the destruction of the very idea of "truth", also destroy democracy and impose fear and hatred on rational debate.

Final considerations

Researchers who have been studying post-truth in recent years have dedicated themselves to the study of different aspects of the phenomenon: the technological conditions that provided it, its constitution as a "culture", the phenomena associated with it (cult of amateurism, scientific denialism, bubble effect, cognitive bias), among others. Because it is a very recent phenomenon, and has been studied in different scientific disciplines, it is difficult to have mappings of its incidence in scientific production at this time.

However, a concern of the various sciences that have studied post-truth is, in addition to understanding it properly, pointing out strategies to combat its harmful effects, even though such discussion is still incipient. McIntyre (2019) points out several actions such as denouncing and combating false information and attempts to obscure and create confusion about issues, stimulating critical thinking, and not assuming that only "others" are being driven by their confirmation biases. Santaella (2019) mentions the action of various verification and education services against fake news, as well as the promotion of an "intelligent, human and reasonable use" (SANTAELLA, 2019, p. 24) of digital networks. Ferrari (2018) proposes that people need to know the logic of creating and functioning bubbles or echo chambers, that they realize that they are informationally deplete, and that they perform actions to pierce the locks of personalized information and the comfort zone.

In all the explicit or implicit proposals of the different authors who have studied post-truth, one point is in common: the defense of values such as democracy, inclusion, diversity, sustainability, reason and the promotion of a culture of peace, values that have been increasingly threatened by the proliferation of post-truth.

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the phenomenon of post-truth, based on a systematization of works carried out by different authors from different sciences and countries. This systematization is structured as follows: first, some factors related to the causes that produced the phenomenon are presented; the following are some of its characteristics; in the end, some of its consequences or implications are identified. It is concluded that the phenomenon needs to be understood beyond its technological dimension or individual actions: it needs to be understood as a culture, a mentality, associated with other phenomena such as the decline of reason, the valorization of democracy, multiculturalism and growth of the culture of hate.

Keywords: Post-truth. Fake news. Nationalpopulism.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o fenômeno da pós-verdade, a partir de uma sistematização de trabalhos realizados por diferentes autores de diferentes ciências e países. Essa sistematização está estruturada da seguinte forma: primeiro, são apresentados alguns fatores relacionados com as causas que produziram o fenômeno; a seguir, são apresentadas algumas de suas características; ao final, são identificadas algumas de suas consequências ou implicações. Conclui-se que o fenômeno precisa ser compreendido além de sua dimensão tecnológica ou de ações individuais: ele precisa ser entendido como uma cultura, uma mentalidade, associada a outros fenômenos como o declínio da razão, da valorização da democracia, do multiculturalismo e o crescimento da cultura do ódio.

Palavras-chave: Pós-verdade. Notícias falsas. Nacionalpopulismo.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el fenómeno de la posverdad, basado en una sistematización de trabajos realizados por diferentes autores de diferentes ciencias y países. Esta sistematización está estructurada de la siguiente manera: primero, se presentan algunos factores relacionados con las causas que produjeron el fenómeno; las siguientes son algunas de sus características; al final, se identifican algunas de sus consecuencias o implicaciones. Se concluye que el fenómeno debe entenderse más allá de su dimensión tecnológica o acciones individuales: debe entenderse como una cultura, una mentalidad, asociada con otros fenómenos como el declive de la razón, la valorización de la democracia, el multiculturalismo y el crecimiento de la cultura del odio.

Palabras clave: Posverdad. Informaciones falsas. Nacionalpopulismo.