

A Psychoanalytic Glance At Fake News

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'Fake News' is a recent expression that designates and explains the idea of 'a hoax news'. The phenomenon has always existed, but after World War I, with the progress of mass communication and marketing strategies, it gained volume, social, financial and political relevance, with repercussions in all areas of culture. Fake news is created and disseminated with the intention of deceiving its receiver, altering its construction of the perception of reality and favoring the conception of a neorealism with a strong element of manipulation. The creators' gains are varied, from narcissistic satisfaction to relevant financial or political gains.

The expressive developments of communication in the 21st century, the deepening of marketing strategies and technological advances with the new media resources, social (or also 'anti-social') platforms, speed, the decentralization of the origin of information and cultural changes came together in the explosion of this phenomenon around the world.

Its extensive propagation by individuals, groups, institutions, governments and the use of robots, algorithms and other instruments for its creation and dissemination make it impossible, at the moment, to assess the amount or the proportion spread every minute concerning news from reliable and substantiated sources. However, significant data were published in *Science Magazine* by a group of researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2018 (Vosoughi et al., 2018), noting that fake news spreads significantly further, faster, being more pervasive and more replicated than all other categories of information, regardless of the fact that it was initially propagated by robots. According to the researchers, this data implies that fake news spreads more than substantiated news because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it.

The 'Fake News' phenomenon has the 'post-truth' conceptual basis. A linguistic structure that has always existed throughout history, but it was named, according to the Oxford Dictionary by the increasing frequency of its identification, in 1992. In 2016, it was chosen as 'word of the year', by the same dictionary, which defines it as 'utterances that produce meanings without objective substrate, which are imposed by the emotional appeal, by the power of persuasion or by the authority or credibility of those who formulate them'.

No communication phenomenon of this magnitude and with these characteristics would be possible were it not for a specific human receptivity to its properties in the individual or collective context. We are well acquainted with sticky personalities, ones with affinities for the dramatic and the catastrophic, people who are dominated by resentment or fraternal conflicts, as well as pathologies of the narcissistic spectrum that have, in this mixture, the tendency of attacking reality in many ways including the attack on another human being in which, individually, I think collaborates with the phenomenon we are focusing on. However, its magnitude, constancy and its insertion in a set of manifestations of the attack on reality that includes the disregard of the other human allows us to conjecture 'Fake News' as a symptom of a contemporary group mentality.

Possibly we are talking about something from the culture and its action on the individual psyche. I will use Jean Laplanche's model (Laplanche, 1987[1992], 2003, 2007[2015]), which seems to me quite integrative between these areas and with possibilities of a high heuristic for the psychoanalytic conjecture in question.

In this model, the creation of meanings in the human mind, precursors of symbolization and constituents of the psyche and with it the 'self' notion (notion of I), uses myths and cultural symbols as auxiliaries in the process of its construction (metabolism/translation). As auxiliaries, myths, symbols and its interaction can facilitate, hinder or prevent the psyche building process.

Thus, myths that have no saturated elements, in motion, with space for the metabolization/translation work will structure the psyche, while saturated myths tend to be toxic and will hinder or prevent this process (Calich, 2019). Laplanche's model regarding the myth-symbolic allows us to have a psychoanalytical detail of the interaction between culture and the individual psyche, going beyond the idea that culture 'imposes' sociological standards on the individual. If the individual has his psychic world in expansion and complexification of singular meanings, with a predominance of structuring myths, progressively the content of one of the myths will be transformed and integrated into his personality (Calich, 2019, 2021).

So, I want to highlight two constituents of our contemporary myth: the post-truth ('Fake News') and the fantasy of absolute freedom (freedom without limits). To clarify the latter context and its importance, I make a brief historical summary, based on previous work (Calich, 2021). At the beginning of the 20th century, a relevant epistemological revolution took place, when new observational biases determined the loss of the universality of theories, with the growing importance of individuality, subjectivity, the participation of the observer experience, intersubjectivity, complexity, interpretation as an instrument for apprehending reality, intuition, and, as already said, the 'end of certainties' (Prigogine, 1996), which significantly altered the worldview of most thinkers in the various knowledge branches and from which Freud was one of the precursors; it has been influencing the mentality since then.

The new myth created included the element that the simplicity of the world had been taken away from us, that the notion of certainties and even truths had disappeared and that, therefore, the illusion of security with historical structures was denied to us.

This new cultural configuration leads us to a new and significant helplessness. If culture, as Freud said in 1930 (Freud, 1930[1996]), was a poor modulator of our destructiveness and kept 'discontent' in an unstable balance, with a continued need to manage the individual/collective, at the end of the third part of the 20th century, this 'conversation' becomes progressively more difficult, with an even greater reduction in its protective role. The loss of security in historical structures (I point out the examples of the growing failure of traditional religious institutions and the metanarratives as universal truths) encourages individuality, contemporary social 'tribalisms' [\[1\]](#) (Maffesoli, 1995), the polarization of ideas and a change in power and domination settings. Even the states/nations begin to lose power to the 'market' and to the new constructions of truth, diluting the notion of violence's control, altering the 'discontent in the civilization', by increasing insecurity and uncertainty. The new social and cultural configuration offers even less protection against individual and collective destructiveness, therefore favoring resources for narcissism.

Hyper-technology has helped to shift the balance between pleasure and reality, dramatically favoring illusion, adding to the myth of unlimited pleasure and to omnipotence. The idea that we completely dominate nature, being able to modify everything, from genetics to, supposedly, our psychic and physical sufferings of any kind begins to predominate and come into conflict with the myth of solidary and sustainable progress. The easy, fast, cheap and pleasurable have come to occupy the *dominant mentality*, becoming associated with the knowledge evolution that accompanies hyper-technology.

I highlight the thoughtful essay on postmodernity by Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1979[1986]) involving the radical relativization of the truth concept. Lyotard develops the idea that the loss of explanatory macrosystems (including Marxism and psychoanalysis) considered capable of universally revealing the truth of the human condition, places the world into postmodernity. For this author, this is characterized by the arrival of a post-industrial society, understood as a gigantic network of linguistic games, in which information has become the most important source of power, domination and economic strength.

Fredric Jameson (Jameson, 1991[2013]), expanding on Lyotard's ideas, introduces the concept of 'crisis of representation', where:

1. If the facts are unknowable, their interpretation is more relevant than they are.
2. And if there are no criteria to validate the interpretations, all of them can be true.
3. Therefore, the one that convinces the interlocutor is more valuable.

Lyotard and Jameson's reflections anticipate the concept of post-truth and its instrument, 'Fake News'. The current means of social communication have the ability to bring together groups (tribes) that in other circumstances would never have the opportunity to do so. Suicides, pedophiles, international terrorist networks, self-mutilators, criminals in general, all groups interested in power began to proclaim, disseminate and impose 'their truths' and oppose to the 'truths' that have been structured by the world until then. The wave of occasional truths, without recognizable foundations, imposed by the force of persuasion, by the new power organizations, by the favoring of the illusion of unlimited pleasure and by the new 'tribal' fragmentation structure, creates the post-truth's world.

If we cannot seek the truth, all hypotheses, in the current mentality, are considered of equal value and scope, with a significant power to confuse and destroy concepts and structures. The idea that 'this is my truth' begins to be imposed, boosted by the power of diffusion and unlimited persuasion determined by the full force of the new mass communication. From this new force, I can impose 'my truth'. Opinion on complex topics becomes 'free' and 'everyone has the right to have an opinion', regardless of the number of variables' absorption that compose it and the relationship between them. It is what I have called 'opinion's pornography' (Calich, 2003), due to its direct relationship with the discharge's pleasure, its excitatory value, disconnection from the psychic structure and, therefore, the loss of the creation of meanings.

Although the interaction between myths can mean that a portion of the population is not dominated by this new mentality, the tendency, influenced by the seduction of unlimited pleasure and by the psyche's denial, is the one that predominates. The phenomenon applies to all relationships. In my knowledge, they lead to the liberation of individual and collective violence that go against social order (and, in its most radical form, against any 'regulator'), in opposition to the apparent privilege that we live in relation to other moments in history. The new helplessness, the illusion of unlimited pleasure, of unlimited power and the post-truth narrative lead to the culture of disregard for the other, to the divorce of the corporeal and the self: the culture of narcissism.

The idea is that we will be immortal, without suffering or pain, or the trial of growth and maturation; we will no longer make psychic efforts to influence our destiny; our bodies and minds will no longer limit our pleasure, and everything will depend on our will and powers of enforcement'. In this new *libertarian mentality*, we will be free from all our incompleteness. The representational body is denied and even foreclosed, as is the psyche.

The world created by this mentality is that of pseudo-intimacy (Calich, 2017) where the intimate relationship with the object is replaced by its simulacrum, its phenomenological similarities: social pacts, adjacency, secrecy, sex, etc.

Like every myth's symbolic structure, language and discourse are modified to express it. In addition, there is a change in the subject's relationship with his speech. Discourses are often not taken as something that opens a reflection; they tend to reflect a single discourse, favoring radicalization. Many patients do not have questions about themselves, but answers adapted from the current discourse and social categories without genuine curiosity. Without conscience, the search for absolute freedom places people in an inverse relationship, of intense submission, including certain current psychoanalytic practices and thoughts.

A new 'cultural discontent' includes the tension between how much the individual, with his hyper-individuality, must renounce to integrate into the world and how much society must concede to the particularities and idiosyncrasies of each hyper-individuality, without getting disintegrated. A world of narcissistic pacts, social collusion, media popularity, an 'I-without-I' and an 'ethics-without-ethics'.

With the 'contemporary tribal' structure, the illusion of unlimited pleasure and the logic of displaced and diluted domination attributed to the individual and fragmented groups, an increasing number of new exclusionary categories are created. The level of intolerance and prejudice between groups increases, as does the violence between them. However, in the same logic just described, the symbolic-myth created from the included/excluded opposition also creates the 'prestige fetish' and the 'discourse of the banished' (Calich, 2021). The first ones naturalize an exclusion, humiliation and abuse (for example, the 'cancellation' phenomenon of professional and even family social groups and networks) and the second one gathers together legions of resentful and wronged people because they feel deprived of an illusory completeness attributed to the group from which they feel deprived (and often in other areas). These groups tend, at present, to indiscriminately naturalize all relationships, especially those that are steeped in inequalities and social disconnections. Like everyone who is resentful and wronged, they use the narrative that the world owes them and they have the 'right' to demand reparation, albeit in increasingly violent ways, increasing the 'broth' of destructiveness.

Furthermore, in these new narcissistic structures of domination and their totalizing discourses, there is a tendency to politicize all forms of human relationships and to naturalize those that are sheltered in their discourses and to demonize those that escape them. Even in arguments in favor of plurality and diversity, the narratives tend towards 'unicity' [\[2\]](#) and excluding.

The population subjected to an 'excess of information' due to the overload of the media and social networks, by the post-truth phenomenon and by the exposure to complexity, finds it difficult to have references, including identity references capable of maintaining a reasonable level of security, support of historical structures and the notion of continuity. This becomes more a function of repetition than the construction of a psychic temporality with expectation of the future.

The only force capable of opposing the preponderance of these non-structuring myths is the recovery or the first installation of the libidinal investment with the linking power. It is our duty as psychoanalysts and, in my view, our greatest possible contribution to contemporary society to bring the topic to the discussion and reflexively assist in the arduous search for solutions.

[1] Maffesoli argues that mass culture has disintegrated and that today social existence is driven by fragmented tribal groupings, organized around the slogans, brand names and catchphrases of marketing culture.

[2] Unicity, the oneness of a human being in an evolution of adaptive system and environments.

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Image: Dirty White Trash (With Gulls), 1998. Tim Noble & Sue Webster

Translation: Analucia dos Santos