

BEYOND THE DISCOURSE OF POST-TRUTH: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE IDEA OF FAKE NEWS BASED ON CORPUS LINGUISTICS (AN EDUCATIONAL ANALYSIS)

ALÉM DO DISCURSO DA PÓS-VERDADE: ALGUMAS REFLEXÕES SOBRE A IDEIA DE FALSAS NOTÍCIAS COM BASE NA LINGÜÍSTICA DE CORPUS (UMA ANÁLISE EDUCACIONAL)

MÁS ALLÁ DEL DISCURSO DE POST-VERDAD: ALGUNAS REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA IDEA DE FALSAS NOTICIAS BASADAS EN LINGÜÍSTICA CORPUS (ANÁLISIS EDUCATIVO)

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ABSTRACT: The study aims to go beyond the discourse of post-truth: some reflections on the idea of fake news based on corpus linguistics (an educational analysis). Seeking to illustrate how we deceive ourselves by attempting to understand fake news through the notion of a post-truth society. We argue that both the concepts of fake news and post-truth are not an aberration to the history of media practices, neither are they of contemporary origins. They are an intricate part of the discursive practices in which media as an institution engages. The article builds on Foucault's approach to discursive practices and applies a meta-discursive framework to trace the genealogy of post-truth and fake news in an Indian context. The article also offers a critical reflection on some of the key strategies to contain and counter fake news. For instance, media literacy and linguistic approaches such as corpus linguistics to detect fake news.

KEYWORDS: Fake news. Journalism education. Post-truth. Corpus linguistics. Media.

RESUMO: Este estudo busca ir além do discurso da pós-verdade: algumas reflexões sobre a ideia de fake news a partir da linguística de corpus (uma análise educacional). Este artigo ilustra como nos enganamos ao tentar entender fake news por meio da noção de uma sociedade pós-verdade. Argumentamos que tanto os conceitos de fake news quanto de pós-verdade não são uma aberração para a história das práticas de mídia e nem são de origens contemporâneas. Eles são uma parte intrincada das práticas discursivas nas quais a mídia como instituição se engaja. O artigo baseia-se na abordagem de Foucault às práticas discursivas e aplica uma estrutura meta-discursiva para traçar a genealogia da pós-verdade e das fake news em um contexto indiano. O artigo também oferece uma reflexão crítica sobre

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algumas das principais estratégias para conter e combater fake news. Por exemplo, alfabetização midiática e abordagens linguísticas, como linguística de corpus para detectar fake news.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Fake news. Educação em jornalismo. Pós-verdade. Linguística de corpus. Meios de comunicação.*

RESUMEN: *El objetivo de este estudio fue ir más allá del discurso de la posverdad: algunas reflexiones sobre la idea de fake news basadas en la lingüística de corpus (un análisis educativo). Este artículo ilustra cómo nos engañamos a nosotros mismos al intentar comprender las noticias falsas a través de la noción de una sociedad posterior a la verdad. Argumentamos que tanto los conceptos de noticias falsas como de posverdad no son una aberración de la historia de las prácticas mediáticas ni tampoco son de origen contemporáneo. Son una parte intrincada de las prácticas discursivas en las que se involucran los medios como institución. El artículo se basa en el enfoque de Foucault de las prácticas discursivas y aplica un marco metadiscursivo para rastrear la genealogía de la posverdad y las noticias falsas en un contexto indio. El artículo también ofrece una reflexión crítica sobre algunas de las estrategias clave para contener y contrarrestar las noticias falsas. Por ejemplo, la alfabetización mediática y los enfoques lingüísticos como la lingüística de corpus para detectar noticias falsas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Nuevo falso. Educación en periodismo. Post-verdad. Lenguaje del cuerpo. Medios de comunicación.*

Introduction

Over the last few years, media professionals, academicians, and political leaders have keenly engaged in probing the phenomenon of ‘fake news’. Ironically enough, the expression ‘fake news’ was popularized by Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential campaign to discredit his opponents and some of the media houses¹ (ROSE, 2016). What started from Trump’s attempt to belittle his critics expanded to a point where the very credibility of news was questioned by those who claimed that lies and deception have taken over the sensibilities of reason in the public domain (PETERS, 2017). Two factors contributed to this heightened presence of fake news in the public domain. The rise of right-wing politics coupled with the concern over the dubious role of social media to amplify the performance of fake news. And it has created a sense of hysteria around fake news leading some to suggest that we are leaving in a post-truth society² (HANNAN, 2018). The issue of fake news, since then, has largely

¹ Alongside the election of Trump as 45th President of the USA, England's referendum decision to leave European Union also played a critical role in generating discourse around fake news.

² Much recently Chomsky has reflected his concerns over the ability of social media to undermine the conventional wisdom of filtering the news that is received. See https://www.salon.com/2017/01/03/noam-chomsky-you-cant-educate-yourself-by-looking-things-up-online_partner/

been constituted around two sets of inquiries. First, what defines the idea of fake news, methods to spot and contain fake news, and a further insistence on the validity of alternative facts. Second, to understand the mechanism through which fake news is generated, circulated, and consumed. In both ways truth and its cognate concepts - right, accurate, and legitimate - are perceived as central to the information-seeking process. Such a monolithic idea of fake news is conditioned on the belief that people rely on media to censure information based on the veracity of the truth, thereby undermining the other way in which people seek information. Take for instance, in India the news about cow urine (*gomutra*) can cure cancer is immediately dismissed as unscientific and rightly so. This might be fake news in the scientific sense but the belief that cow urine has the medicinal ability is part of a certain belief system and the people who consume or spread such information does so with or without engaging with the idea that scientific truth is necessary to verify their claim. Therefore, the debate on fake news needs to be put with the episteme through which information is produced or verified in society and the fact that truth is not the only value that can be applied by the people to produce and verify a certain set of information. The attempt here is not to engage in the intricacies of truth-telling but it is indeed significant to keep in mind that discourses which rest on the veracity of truth and truthfulness themselves have a complex genealogy (WILSON, 2019).

Having pointed out some of the problems in formulating fake news, this article does not deny the urgent need to combat the issue of fake news for the danger of creating an empire of misinformation is real. But the problem is we cripple ourselves intellectually as we seek an understanding of fake news by forcing a choice between declaring that we live in a post-truth society or admitting to what exists as a status quo. Rather than imposing this choice, there is a need to understand the key discursive actors in the discourse on fake news and the post-truth society. The present crisis in the state of traditional and digital media is part of the continuous discursive realignment as the liberal democratic rational and their 'regime of truth' faces a moment of crisis (WILSON, 2019). This article interrogates some of these anxieties in democratic societies which are reflected in the contemporary narratives and discourse swiveled around the emergence of a post-truth society.

Fake News, where it comes from?

The elevation of Donald Trump to the presidency of the USA had a seismic impact on the faith of the liberal elite. A sense of disappointment prevailed on how deceptive content, misinformation, and propaganda aligned with certain belief systems managed to subvert the democratic process (FREEDLAND, 2016; RICHARDSON, 2017). Since then, fake news along with post-truth has been employed to explain this democratic disruption. Important point is that while Donald Trump used the term fake news to discredit the liberal media outlets for them fake news was more of a symptom of a society that has lost its faith in truth and is vulnerable to lies that are circulated without much care through social media. The Cambridge dictionary defines fake news as false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke. However, the ambit of what can be defined as fake news is well beyond what is encapsulated in the above definition. Fake news, it seems is a label deployed to deter people from trusting media reports. It can also be used to serve petty purposes such as insulting or intellectually belittling the opponents (FARKAS; SCHOU, 2018). It is also defined as a fraudulent media product (CORNER, 2017) making fake news a ubiquitous term in the public imagination. The idea of news deliberately counterfeit information, as a journalistic practice or strategies of deceptions used by sources themselves. The above definitions fail to encapsulate the current narrative and discourse on fake news where it is seen as a systemic product of a time where liberal democratic values are on a downslide. The focus in the latter is laid both on the journalistic practices as well on the political practices and ideas (PETER, 2018). The following statement by the French President in 2018 sums up the anxiety among the political leaders in the liberal democracies to confront the issue of fake news. The apocalyptic tone of the statement is highly suggestive of the urgency.

We have to fight against the ever-growing virus of fake news, which exposes our people to irrational fear and imaginary risk.... Without reason, without truce, there's no real democracy, "the 40-year-old leader continued". Because democracy is about true choices and rational decisions. The corruption of information is an attempt to corrode the very spirit of our democracies (CONCHA, 2018).

Further, at times fake news and the hysteria of post-truth society are conveniently bundled between fascism and liberalism, pitted as historical binaries to each other. And the blame for the emerge is pitted on the postmodern sensibilities of French scholarship which has given rise to the alt-facts and post-truths (TERTRAIS, 2017). This Orwellian zeal is also

based on the belief that only a select few institutions that harbor liberal and democratic values could uphold the moral and value system so essential for the news-making process. They have lost their monopoly over the misinformed citizens, who are now led by the right-wing brigade have started to spread lies, misinformation, propaganda. In this way, fake news is presented as an epidemic of exceeding proportions and an aberration in the long history of media practices. An epochal shift, a breach in the traditional gatekeepers of truth- editors, journalists, experts, and public intellectuals (BALL, 2017; LEVINSON, 2017; D' ANCONA, 2017; RABIN-HAVT, 2016).

More importantly, by labeling fake news as the key marker of current media-political situations a different spin is given to fake news. In which, facts and truth are presented outside the realm of political contestation (HARJUNIEMI, 2021). On the contrary facts, most of the time exist as part of a narrative arch which makes them both admissible to some and equally abhorrent to the others. In this regard, Foucault's concept of 'regime of truth' and his statement during the 1976 interview is quite interesting, where he said that "truth isn't outside power or derived of power". In this interview, Foucault further argues that truth "is produced by virtue of multiple constraints" and "each society has its regime of truth". It means every society has a corpus of mechanisms and institutions through which they assort and label the possibilities of truth (FOUCAULT, 1976). The mainstream media dictates the manifestation of a liberal regime of truth based on scientific rationality and dominated by expertise.

Beyond Truth, Lies, and Deception

As pointed out in the earlier section the notion of post-truth is closely associated with fake news. It was the oxford word in 2016 described as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (OXFORD, 2016). Jason David in his article argues "post-truth discourse is distinguished by an anxiety regarding the love of truth, rather than truth's presence or absence". This means not only truth as we understand in the media discourse in certain sense is historically produced but the present concern regarding the dishonesty is largely a manifestation of anxiety regarding the importance of the truth in the public domain. Read the opening statement from the opinion piece by Jonathan Freedland appearing in Guardian (2016)

In this era of post-truth politics, an unhesitating liar can be king. The more brazen his dishonesty, the less he minds being caught with his pants on fire,

the more he can prosper. And those pedants still hung up on facts and evidence and all that boring stuff are left for dust, their boots barely laced while the lie has spread halfway around the world.

Returning to the argument made at the beginning of this article that the present concerns on fake news are largely conceived on the wrongly held notion that the public relies on truth and it is equally available to all. As argued by Scott Wilson “truth has never been so clear or stable as our contemporary anxieties might suggest” (WILSON, 2019). There is another question aligned to this discourse that how earnest is the attempt to understand the downfall of media and reporting. Therefore, it is essential to locate the ideals through which the press and mass media imagines themselves as a key discursive actor in the liberal democratic political discourse. This state of delusion in the mainstream media stems from a historical understanding of the self. Jan Krasni calls this the self-conceptualization of mainstream media as liberal, progressive and democratic (KRASNI, 2020). Historically speaking, the press in a global sense was able to establish itself as the facilitator of an idealized public sphere (HABERMAS, 1989). Further, guided by the liberal political institutions, media was believed to promote competing arguments, essential for achieving a common good. However, to a large extent, most of these ideals are subverted either under the logic of profit orientation or due to the lack of diversity in the media houses. Therefore, more often instead of facilitating a nuanced public debate media reproduce or confirm the exiting discursive positions (KRANSI, 2021; HARJUNIEMI, 2021). For instance, in the case of highly upper-caste Indian media the reportage on the caste in general and reservation, in particular, has been highly partisan and at times selective, factually incorrect, and done with an intent to dismiss the policy of reservation.

On the other hand, the practice of deliberative disinformation by media has plenty of precedent in the global history of journalism. To name a few- yellow journalism of the 1890s and tabloid journalism of the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, the 2008 paid news incident in India, which exposed the deliberative practice of pseudo journalistic disinformation. Paid news is defined as a practice to present selective information to deceive its readers (SAINATH, 2012). In October 2008 Times of India carried a story on the success of Monsanto Bt cotton seeds painting an encouraging picture of rural India. This news report was carried around the same time as the controversy over the use of genetically modified seeds in India was being debated. The news report claimed that there has been no incident of suicides in *Bhamraja* and *Antargaon* villages and people are prospering in agriculture. The same report has also claimed that the switchover from the conventional cotton variety to the

Bt cotton was responsible for this change in the life of the farmers. A few years later, in 2011 the same story was reproduced in TOI, only this time as an advertisement.

However, the current emphasis on the term post-truth is a rather conscious effort on the part of liberal intellectuals to set apart the recent history of fake news from the earlier criticism of mainstream media. To this, Herman and Chomsky *Manufacturing Consent* provides an excellent framework to understand how propaganda and misinformation are reproduced in a democratic setup through the five filters of mass and mainstream media. The five filters: size and ownership of the media firm, advertising as the principal source of revenue, control asserted by the corporations, state and other agents of power, flack as a mechanism of social control and anticommunism or any ideological another trope that can be employed to manufacture consent (HERMANN; CHOMSKY, 1998). The propaganda model debunks the idea that media as an institution is liberal and directed towards the public interest. In other words, what gets reported must pass through a series of gatekeeping structures that exist in a media institution. Jan Kransi points such a leftist critique of western media and society is not only confirmed by the liberal/liberal-left public intellectuals and media personals but is also addressed in the very language of a post-truth society. He meticulously outlines, how over the years the term post-truth first formulated by Steve Tesich (1992) was used to critically engage with media. A tradition according to him was further by Herman and Chomsky in their work on manufacturing consent and later by Colin Crouch (2000) in his book post-democracy. The common factor in all these works is that they list out certain warning signs about the concentration of power in a post-democratic and post-truth world and establish the mainstream media as a key discursive actor. Therefore, the discourse on fake news and post-truth is neither an aberration to old media practices and nor an epochal shift. As suggested by Jan Kransi the 2016 US election which challenged the self-perception of liberal media marked the hijacking of the discourse of fake news from the left/left-liberal. The same is true in the Indian context.

How to Counter and Contain Fake News?

What then is the solution to combat misinformation and deception? One prominent practice in media affect studies is to gauge the psychological and behavioral impact on the readers and the audience. Such an approach lays an overwhelming focus on an individual's susceptibility to propaganda and simply assumes that the individuals with greater media literacy are better at recognizing fake news (JANG *et al.*, 2019). There are others in Indian

academia, who have gone back to the old line of argument, that is making a call to restructure the university curriculum to engage with post-truth politics (BHASKARAN *et al.*, 2019). The problem with both approaches is that they fundamentally reproduce the liberal mainstream media arguments and admit to the pretense of universal truth. The linguistic-based detection of fake news is another prominent way of understanding and detecting the linguistic variants (RASHKIN *et al.*, 2017). However, as with media literacy, the linguistically based detection of fake news also falters in understanding discursive actors. As argued by Lakoff (2004) “Corpus linguistics can only provide you with utterances (or written letter sequences or character sequences or sign assemblages). To do cognitive linguistics with corpus data, you need to interpret the data, to give it meaning. The meaning doesn’t occur in the corpus data”

Also, even the current rigor to decipher fake news by fact-checking websites is mostly restorative and hardly rivals the old media practices, which themselves produce structures of episteme that then make possible the condition of truth, untruth, and post-truth to occur (WILSON, 2019). The other part of the problem is how the liberal democracies under the pretext of the common good have failed to foster a plural space.

In the Indian context, any serious engagement on the question of fake news must first challenge the symbolic structures and the discursive actors that authorize truth and post-truth logic. One also needs to question the journalistic capital which overzealously maintains social order. Last but not the least, one should disrupt the sense of entitlement by which media labels itself as progressive and democratic and seek public opinion through emotional orchestration. A report published by Oxfam and NewsLaundry in 2019, *Who Tells Our Stories: representation of marginalized caste Indian newsroom*, is a reminder in this regard. The report revealed that out of 121 leadership positions across newspapers, TV news channels, magazines, and news websites none was occupied by a person from a lower caste community in India (TIWARI, 2019). Whereas 106 positions were occupied by the individuals belonging to the upper or dominant caste. This gross marginalization of the lower caste and hegemony of the oppressor caste plays a significant role in the omission and misrepresentation of the issue of caste. The lived experience of lower caste becomes the issue of upper or dominant caste subjectivity and therefore contributes to epistemic violence by pursuing the discursive interest of upper caste sensibilities. The challenge to such orchestrations can only come from the counter-hegemonic spaces. For example, Dalit Camera, a Dalit (untouchables) led media is using digital platforms to narrate and document their oppressive past and present, and expose the caste based privileges in the society.

Conclusion

While the issue of fake news must be dealt with utmost sincerity, however, the current approaches seem to disengage themselves from the intricate history of the critique of the media system. They falsely present the orchestration of public opinion as an aberration or a moment of rupture. Even the responses to tackle fake news such as media literacy and linguistic-based detection while important only offer a patchwork to the much larger problem. More importantly, to have a long-term perspective there is a need to cultivate a sense of irony while negotiating fake news. It is important to locate the concepts of fake news and post-truth society as part of discursive traditions and negate hegemonic insistence on the monopoly of truth. Therefore, any true engagement against fake and post-truth must start by challenging the meaning-making process and production of truth.

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