

DOSSIER

CHAFF, WHEAT, FILTERS, AND BUBBLES:

a discussion on *fake news*, journalism,
credibility, and affections at network
times

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ABSTRACT – This paper seeks to situate historically the production of what is now called “*fake news*” and points out the misconception of establishing a dividing line in which the traditional press would be the sole source for reliable information, even though it was and still is the origin of much untrue or biased information. It criticizes the methods of the fact-checking agencies, which end up selling a false idea of objectivity. But above all, it points out the need to deepen the discussion about credibility at a time when reference information standards are challenged and beliefs seem to be allowed to prevail over the evidences. If arguments are useless in face of convictions, and if journalism is more than never necessary, the way to recover its role would have to be sought outside the rational field, in order to deactivate the affections that lead to the formation of bubbles refractory to all criticism.

Key words: Journalism. *Fake news*. Credibility. Fact checking agencies. Affections.

O JOIO, O TRIGO, OS FILTROS E AS BOLHAS: uma discussão sobre *fake news*, jornalismo, credibilidade e afetos no tempo das redes

RESUMO – Este artigo procura situar historicamente a produção do que hoje se chama “*fake news*” e assinala o equívoco de se estabelecer uma linha divisória na qual a imprensa tradicional seria a exclusiva fonte para a informação confiável, mesmo porque ela própria foi e continua a ser a origem de muita informação inverídica ou deturpada. Critica os métodos das agências de checagem, que acabam por vender uma falsa ideia de objetividade. Mas, principalmente, aponta a necessidade de um aprofundamento da discussão sobre credibilidade, em um tempo em que os padrões da informação de

referência são contestados e as crenças parecem autorizadas a prevalecer sobre as evidências. Se os argumentos são inúteis diante das convicções, e se apesar disso o jornalismo é mais do que nunca necessário, a saída para recuperar o seu papel precisaria ser buscada fora do campo racional para depois recuperá-lo, de modo a desativar os afetos que levam à formação das bolhas refratárias a qualquer crítica.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. *Fake news*. Credibilidade. Agências de checagem. Afetos.

LA CIZAÑA, EL TRIGO, LOS FILTROS Y LAS BURBUJAS: una discusión sobre *fake news*, periodismo, credibilidad y afectos en el tiempo de las redes

RESUMEN – Este artículo busca situar históricamente la producción de lo que hoy se llama “*fake news*” y señala el equívoco de establecer una línea divisoria en la que la prensa tradicional sería la única fuente para la información confiable, incluso porque ella misma fué y sigue siendo el origen de mucha información falsa o engañosa. Critica los métodos de las agencias de chequeo, que acaban por vender una errónea idea de objetividad. Pero, principalmente, apunta la necesidad de una profundización de la discusión sobre credibilidad, en un tiempo en que los parámetros de la información de referencia son contestados y las creencias parecen autorizadas a prevalecer sobre las evidencias. Si los argumentos son inútiles ante las convicciones, y si a pesar de ello el periodismo sigue siendo necesario, la salida para recuperar su papel necesitaría ser buscada fuera del campo racional, para desactivar los afectos que llevan a la formación de las burbujas refractarias a cualquier crítica.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. *Fake news*. Credibilidad. Agencias de chequeo. Afectos.

1 Introduction

“Newspaper editors are men who separate the wheat from the chaff, and then print the chaff”. Improperly attributed to Mark Twain, Adlai Stevenson II’s famous – and of course exaggerated – irony could serve as a counterpoint to the discourse that presents journalism made by media corporations as an antidote to fake news produced in the virtual environment of social networks. Demonstrating the falsehood or at least the partiality or insufficiency of this discourse would therefore be the first step in avoiding misunderstandings and simplifications in pedagogical activity by a critical awareness of information. This does not mean an undervaluation of the role of journalism in shaping citizenship: on the contrary, as long as it is made according to internationally established ethical principles, journalistic mediation is fundamental to democratic life, precisely because of its commitment to separate the wheat from the chaff – and printing the wheat –, an increasingly relevant task due the growth of uncertainty about the veracity of information that has been circulating in unprecedented volume and speed since the emergence of the internet.

This article begins, therefore, with a critical approach to the proposal of the fact checking agencies, focusing on the initiatives developed in Brazil. However, it seeks a broader historical perspective to try to understand the context in which this need arises, and the difficulties in achieving this objective, considering the crucial problem of credibility.

In fact, we speak of 'citizenship' and 'democratic life' as if there was a consensus on the best form of social life – or the worst, except for all others, in Churchill's famously sarcastic definition – at the very moment when traditional forms of democratic representation have been challenged, if not frankly rejected, in the Western world that created and raised them as an apparently solid conquest, and now is experiencing the resurgence of fascism less than a century after the end of World War II¹.

Although it is not possible to explore this theme within the limits of this article, it is essential to refer it to the proper contextualization of the issues to be addressed here. For, first of all, it will be necessary to point out an obviousness which, perhaps for this very reason, goes unnoticed and leads us to ignore a fundamental problem, as summarized by Schneider (2018): to denounce what is false, we must affirm what is true. But how would this be possible if we give up the notion of truth, or if we assume the relativism that rejects a universal truth, as postmodern epistemologies does? After all, what underlies the goal to fight fake news is the idea that people need reliable information to guide themselves through chaos.

In fact, the cacophony provided by the virtual world would require setting up parameters that allow people to separate truth from falsehood. However, the dynamic of information through the internet, which leads to the formation of self-legitimizing belief bubbles, dismantled the traditional structure in which journalism was a point of reference and activated its filters. Moreover, such an effort to clarify – for example, the issuing of manuals to identify fraud, the recommendation to confirm the information before disclosing it – presupposes an equally enlightened public, in the classic Enlightenment sense, i.e., educated to doubt the appearance of things and encouraged to seek the truth.

Here again, we are dealing with values that have been undermined by the process of capitalism transformation that led, in the late decades of the twentieth century, to the dominance of financial capitalism, which has precisely its main ideological expression in

postmodern relativism. It is no coincidence, moreover, that this is the context in which the expression “post-truth” arises, although what it designates – the prevalence of beliefs over evidence – is an ancestral tendency of humanity². If the debate about postmodernity has practically disappeared from the academic – and the media – agenda, that does not mean that the issue has lost its importance, much less that it has been overcome: on the contrary, it might mean that it has been naturalized. For all the elements of postmodern “fluidity” are present in the paradoxical situation that financial capital has produced: the totalizing, globalizing character of this new “age of flexible accumulation” (Harvey, 1993), for which digital technology is decisive, and the resulting social fragmentation, with the praise of individual initiative – even in the field of communication, with the idea that “the media are us” – and of “entrepreneurship” consistent to the loss of historical social rights, which gives rise to “precariat” (Braga, 2012, 2017) or the new service proletariat, which, in the evocation of Antunes (2018) to Camus, can expect nothing but “the privilege of servitude”.

The consequence is an “education” in the opposite sense of enlightenment, focusing on the systematic production of alienation. In his study of the dialectic of taste, Schneider (2015) points out the central role of the infotelecommunications complex in this process, as the ideological industry of globalized financial capitalism. One of the perspectives to face this system would be to try to identify how journalism could pierce the virtual bubbles that help to reinforce such alienation. But this presupposes a denser discussion of credibility as a core value for journalism.

By advancing the approach of journalism as a form of knowledge, Lisboa and Benetti (2015) propose to discuss credibility as justified true belief and make a fundamental distinction between constituted credibility – self-attributed by the communication vehicle, based on the principles commonly linked to journalistic activity – and perceived credibility – by the public, which is, after all, the most important, for its practical consequences. Applied to the bubbles created by social networks, this argument shows that people give credit to fake news, however presented as facts – as truths – confirming the beliefs of those who receive and help spreading this kind of information. So what matters to this audience is not to discern the true from the false, as we are used to think, but to reiterate these convictions. So credibility would still be a belief, but it would no

longer have to be true, and would be tautologically justified as a way of confirming it.

If this reasoning is correct, it will be necessary to refocus the efforts to pierce this bubble that refuses any questioning. The starting point would be the recognition that, in face of irrational behavior, appealing to reason is ineffective. Instead, acting in the field of emotions – of affections, as Safatle (2015, 2017) says – is crucial to investigate what kind of sensitivities are mobilized and acting on this legion that keeps on believing in what they want, despite all evidences that deny those beliefs. This effort could be a way of trying to deactivate the affections that support this behavior.

This proposition requires a long-term study on alienation and conscience that addresses the issue of faith and its appropriation by political power throughout history. The plain contribution that this article intends to offer is to suggest the need to follow this path and the possibility of following it from a discussion about the production of fake news and the debate of credibility as an essential value for journalism.

2 Fake news: the trivialization of the concept

The naturalization of the term “fake news” tends to lead to an usual misunderstanding of all generalizations incorporated into common sense. But it is not a simple generalization, because it is caused precisely by the political power that has benefited from the spread of lies to win elections, as it was the notorious case of Trump in the United States (Guess et al., 2018), and Bolsonaro, in Brazil³. Both during the campaign and at the government, they strove to systematically disqualify their opponents and elected the mainstream press as their main enemy – albeit with significant differences, because in the Brazilian case Bolsonaro focused on Grupo Globo and *Folha de S. Paulo* but welcomed Globo’s competing television networks which supported him, especially Record network, led by the Universal Church. They accused the media of doing what they themselves were practicing and established the strategy of speaking directly to an audience susceptible to their speeches through the network they have built on the virtual world. Early in the Trump administration, his adviser, Kellayne Conway, caused scandal and astonishment when, in response to an NBC journalist who contested her about the amount of people in the president’s inauguration, she

said she was offering “alternative facts” (Charleaux, 2017). She was just confirming the logic of these new times when factual truth no longer matters. So everything can be fake news, depending on the interest and power of the accuser, and the support of the believer.

It would be, however, very simplifying to say that the success of the tactic of spreading fake news results only from the ignorance of the public, as it was used to say about the manipulative power of traditional media. This tactic combines two main elements. One is the manipulation of archaic fears that affect people’s sense of real or imagined stability – for example, the resurrection of the ghost of communism even so many years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, the spread of the idea that poor immigrants or refugees are a danger and all that undermines the traditional social values. The other one is the discursive strategy, which always starts from some truth and then distorts it. This is the case when the press is accused of lying or misrepresenting information: this indeed happens, as so many academic studies have already proven – although the huge differences between the American and Brazilian press – but the conclusion is diametrically opposed to those studies and leads to reject all information from this source. In Brazil, one reaches the height of accusing Globo and other major media of “communists”, which can be seen as a result of the ideological campaign directed at the base that began to consolidate during the popular mobilizations of contesting Dilma Rousseff’s government, yet in the 2013 demonstrations but especially after the reelection of the president.

In short: there is a great deal of ignorance, which is cultivated by the exploitation of irrational elements coupled with an objective argumentative basis, just as, for example, in anti-vaccination campaigns, based on the suspicion of the interests of the pharmaceutical industry, which actually exist. By the way, media organizations themselves trigger that chain of news, when it suits them.

This framework of generalizing what would be fake news favors the trivialization of the concept, which would require rigorous treatment in academia. This conceptualization refers to the very understanding of the meaning of journalistic activity: it would be relatively easy to define the factual truth to which journalism necessarily refers, but, from then on, a field of interpretive fluidity is formed and this makes all the difference to newsmaking. In fact, there is no other justification for defending the plurality of newspapers as an expression of the classic values of a democracy, and this fluidity

always implies some margin of doubt as to the selection of sources, the approach, the highlights at the headlines or leads, the editing – however less and less the editing is relevant today, considering how news has been shared in the internet. And it is exactly this form of automatic sharing provided by digital technology that further complicates this scenario: it is very common, for example, to see true but old news being presented as current ones, which, depending on the circumstances and relevance of the information, leads to fatal errors for the interpretation of the political conjuncture.

However, I do not want to discuss here the various hypotheses that might allow a more precise definition of what could be classified as “fake”, precisely because my main interest is to point out the importance of the contextualization of information. And this directly concerns what it could be considered an original weakness in the fact-checking project, if it was not even a deliberate attitude to adopt an absolutely simplified criteria of objectivity, that ignores the complexity of journalistic work. At least in the Brazilian case, those criteria are ideologically very well defined.

3 Telling lies by saying only the truth

“The report of my death was an exaggeration”. Mark Twain’s irony – now truly – to the wrong news published in 1897⁴, comes here to point out that fake news, in the most ordinary sense of factually wrong, false information, is not a new phenomenon. If we want to take them as the result of discursive manipulation – in the bad sense that this expression usually carries out – they are part of the political stratagem, so they are as old as humanity.

The illusion of a journalism detached from any interests but reporting facts that occur spontaneously led Daniel Boorstin (1964) in the early 1960s to disqualify what he might today call “fake news”, but then he called “pseudoevents” – or “*factoides*”, as the Brazilian press came to criticize, a few decades later, the strategies of politicians to be always in media: facts produced with the strict objective of becoming news.

Clearly, all the development of journalism studies would demonstrate how complex things are. Gans (1979), for example, would say that all activities that turn into reporting are, after all, media events: the most relevant is that they become news, and why. And

even more than this, to know if and to what degree they influence the subsequent course of events. Schudson would point to the necessary “fabrication” of news that all journalistic work involves, although this formulation may still be misunderstood by professionals today, who associate “fabricate” with “falsifying”. Therefore, the sociologist would clarify, with a word game that can only be appropriately understood in the original English formulation: “we didn’t say journalists *fake* the news, we said journalists *make* the news” (Schudson, 1992, p. 141).

Sevcenko (1996), on the other hand, would reject the distinction between “true” and “created” facts because “the world, as it exists, specifically from the 1920s, is the communications world and the communications complex”. Therefore, the use of media resources to produce artificial situations is part of conflict strategies that involve political and economic decision making. “True and fabricated facts live together as part of a historical reality in which facts can be fabricated, just as facts can unfold on their own, through a genetic chain of historical events”, he said, referring the case of the Gulf War – the first one, then in evidence – “set up as a major media show to represent the success of the new world order”. Hence, he concluded: “These events are so intrinsically embarrassed that it would be denatured to want to separate one from another. They all set up the field of meaning and not one signifies and the other falsifies”.

I make these brief reminders, without even mentioning the studies on journalism as a discourse or as a form of knowledge – and among them Genro Filho (2012) is an unavoidable, though often distorted, reference, as Bellan (2016) has shown –, just to situate the multitude of issues that emerge when someone wants to define what is news.

Palácios (2018) reminds briefly the history of the fact checking activity, which started, according to him, with Ralph Pulitzer, Joseph Pulitzer’s son, at The World, in 1913: with editor-in-chief Isaac White, he created the bureau for accuracy and fair play. The main concern was to avoid mistakes due to the increase of the calumny and defamation lawsuits that the newspaper had been suffering. (By the way, so long afterwards, Tuchman [1993] will show that this remained a fundamental concern of journalists in trying to define objectivity criteria, which she called a “strategic ritual”). Other initiatives followed, although all of them internal to the newsrooms. However, the digitization of information and the subsequent multiplication of social media platforms led to the need for a new checking mechanism. Thus, in the mid-1990s, the first agencies

aimed at this end were launched. Their main goal would no longer be to verify the truthfulness of the news produced by the newspaper companies, but to filter out what would be reliable amid the huge amount of information that people, connected to the internet, began to receive and disseminate, when not, also, to produce.

In Brazil, these agencies started in 2015, following similar experiences in the United States, Europe and Latin America. In 2018, shaken by the scandal of its relationship with Cambridge Analytica in the Brexit and Trump campaigns⁵, *Facebook* hired two of these agencies, *Aos Fatos* and *Lupa*, to scrutinize what was spreading on the networks at the beginning of the presidential election campaign, in a context of unprecedented tension and unpredictability in Brazilian politics since, at least, the end of the military dictatorship, more than three decades later. It would be a way of demonstrating that the biggest social media company was striving to prevent the spread of fake news. These agencies would thus confer a quality “label” to *Facebook*. A “label” that traditional newspaper companies would supposedly carry automatically, as if they were in fact fulfilling their editorial principles.

This is why it is so important to point out the biased discourse of these companies when seeking to set themselves as a credibility benchmark opposed to misinformation on the internet. *Folha de S. Paulo's* most recent editorial project, launched in March 2017, is very clear about this: “Professional journalism is an antidote to false news and intolerance”. Ahead, the document defines the network environment as “a closed condominium of self-referring convictions”, produced by algorithms that “guarantee high audience ratings for oligopoly multinationals” and “feed the sectarianism and the spread of untruths”. The counterpart to the “condominium” would be the “public square” represented by the newspaper itself, “in which the most varied points of view oppose each other and where the dialogue around differences is permanent”.

It must be acknowledged that those who write this kind of editorial project have a great sense of humor. It would be enough to recall, in the specific case of *Folha*, just two striking episodes, among so many others: Dilma Rousseff's fake file, supposedly reproduced from the Dops archives, front page highlight in April 2009, whose authenticity, a few weeks later, the paper stated that it could not be insured, nor ruled out⁶; and the fraud in the results of a survey by its own institute, Datafolha, to argue that Michel Temer, the vice-president who had taken Dilma's place during the impeachment process, “is

better for the country” – headline July 2016 – when, in fact, the majority of respondents called for the anticipation of the elections.

But the main criticism of fact checking agencies is on their criteria and methods. Take the case of *Agência Lupa*, which proclaims itself “the first specialized in fact checking in Brazil”. Its website (*Agência Lupa*, 2015) explains that its methodology “begins with daily observation of what politicians, social leaders and celebrities say in newspapers, magazines, radios, TV shows and on the internet”. Then, the checker selects “the phrase he intends to work on” and seeks to verify its degree of veracity by giving reference to “historical, statistical comparisons, and information concerning the legality or constitutionality of a fact”. Then, “the reporter surveys everything that has already been published on the subject” and may ask “experts to contextualize the subject and avoid misinterpretation of data”. Finally, he “requests the official position of the one who has been checked, giving him time and large opportunity to explain himself”, and then applies labels ranging from “false” to “true”, going through a series of gradations.

If the checking effort was really concerned with the announced caution about contextualization, the selection of the sentences could be an appropriate starting point. This is not the case, however, so the best the agency can offer is the assurance that someone has actually made a statement, or that a certain action has actually been taken, or if a certain video that goes viral on the social networks is a misrepresenting montage, or it’s true but old – so it’s out of context – or whether or not it matches the advertised event.

The most interesting to discuss here, therefore, is what contextualization means, which involves the possible meanings of a narrative and something normally ignored in these assessments: the unsaid.

In the brief text from the binding flap of the book *The Art of Reportage*, compiled by Igor Fuser, Eugênio Bucci (1996) begins by a shocking statement, in the right measure to surprise and instigate the reading: “The facts are the least matter in the large reports”. Bucci then explains: he was not rejecting objectivity and factual truth, but pointing out that this was not enough to do journalism. And he goes on: “The question, therefore, are not the facts, but the meanings they may have”. Therefore, “the reporter must understand what he has to narrate”.

In fact, Bucci’s argument applies to every journalistic practice – not just the large reports –, because it shows that every news,

however “objective”, implies and requires interpretation. It is an almost perfect translation – almost, because it leaves out the unsaid – of an internationally awarded 1987 *Folha de S.Paulo* institutional advertisement, in which an off-line voice is quoting a series of achievements by a man whose face, at first an unfocused image, becomes clear only at the end: he is none other than Hitler. Then the play concludes: “You can tell a lot of lies by saying only the truth”.

This statement is one of the best summaries of the meaning of journalistic practice, because, at the same time, it reveals the misconception of the ordinary understanding, especially in the professional environment, about journalism being a “mere” fact report, and the manoeuvre of hiding information discourses to try to compose a frame consistent with the version that intends to be true. It indicates, in short, the need to broaden the field of investigation and to articulate the information to offer the elements that enable the public to draw their own conclusions.

This is very far from what *Lupa*, and other similar agencies, do, so they end up doing what *Folha’s advertisement* criticizes: after all, isolated phrases may be true but, combined or articulated with other facts, so often they end up telling a big lie.

Luis Felipe Miguel (2018) gives a good example of the distortions resulting from this form of “checking” by addressing the conclusions that *Lupa (Agência Lupa, 2018)* presented on “three false and three true data by Lula” at its rally at the São Bernardo do Campo Metallurgists’ Union, hours before going to jail⁷. For example, among the “truths”, the agency “transforms Lula’s statement – ‘I was the president who made the most universities’ – and concludes that he wins in the mechanical eye”, because “during Lula’s administration, there were created 28 universities” and “at Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s there were 27”. Miguel stresses that the agency forgets the detail that Lula created 23 public universities, while with FHC “they were almost all private (only six federal, five of them as conversion of existing institutions). Not to mention the expansion of places for new students, hiring teachers, multiplying campuses. Or the new federal institutes. Or the democratization of access”. In short, the professor says, “what fact checking does is manipulating reality to diminish the brutal contrast between Lula and FHC administration regarding higher education”.

Even worse, Miguel says, “it’s what is left out. The *Lupa* agency has nothing to say about the central elements of Lula’s speech – the 2016 coup, the judicial persecution against him, the falseness of

the accusations, the partiality of the judiciary”. As if it didn’t matter, “as if all of this was not a matter of truth, but only a quarrel of the political fight. In this sense, fact checking fulfills its ideological role of legitimating the dominant narrative”, which is also the traditional journalistic companies narrative about their own role: the reiteration of the old myth of impartiality in reporting facts, the reinforcement of an old and limited notion of objectivity, as if reality were a list of “objective” facts isolated from the context that can give them meaning. It is no coincidence that these agencies are associated with these companies: they participate in the same effort to legitimize a historical place shaken by the emergence of the internet.

As I wrote at the time – and the following is an adaptation of the article I published (Moretzsohn, 2018) –, this ideological link is even clearer in the face of episodes such as the controversy about the Pope’s blessed rosary that former president Lula received in prison without his bearer, attorney Juan Grabois, being allowed to hand him over personally. The news started on June 11, 2018 in the networks of PT and leftists sites. Both *Lupa* and *Aos Fatos* agencies began to check the information and soon labeled it as “false”, based on a first note of the *VaticanNews* site, which, however, would later be rectified. Both agencies updated the information, but *Aos Fatos* and, initially, *Lupa* also kept the label. On June 13, after Grabois published a letter on *Facebook* giving his version of the incident, *Lupa* would change the label to “watching” [as in ‘keeping an eye on’] – a tag for information that is still being tracked – and add an explanatory text with a sign of “attention”.

For both agencies, all that mattered was whether the phrase “Pope sends rosary to Lula” was true. Certainly that kind of news served in the ideological war – now euphemistically called the “narrative dispute” – around the former president and his role in the election campaign that was just beginning. Of course, it was in the PT’s interest to state that the rosary was a gift from the Pope, but assuring that he did really send it to Lula was not as simple as it might seem at first.

By changing its label from “false” to “watching”, *Lupa* said they were awaiting “an official and definitive clarification” from the Vatican “about the Pope’s desire to give a rosary to the former president”.

Perhaps the checkers ignored the complexity of politics and diplomacy, especially when involving the highest authority of the Catholic Church. Maybe because they are used to – trained to? groomed to? – give definitive and, worse, immediate verdicts, as it has become a habit among journalists.

After recalling that the Pope sent the same gift to notorious political prisoners in Latin America and that so many other controversial episodes have fueled the news in Brazil and over the world without ever being clearly confirmed or denied by the Vatican, Hugo Souza (2018) summarized exemplarily what this case revealed about the role of fact checking agencies:

It is not difficult to suppose that, knowing all this, to the question 'Did Pope send a rosary to Lula?', it will appear a lot of answers most to the taste of this or that political view, this or that view of Brazil, even this or that hatred, and not because of it they will have to become 'true or false' questions, as in elementary school tests. And all because reality, life itself, is an incorrigible ambiguous, full of nuances, given to interpretations, subjected to arguments, riddled with contradictions, so many that not one thousand and one check labels will ever be able to embrace, even less resolve – like the contradictions within the Vatican. (...) Thus, fact checking agencies too, now, or more than ever, find themselves in trouble with a fundamental issue of journalism – credibility, because, after all, it is precisely the most straightforward in journalism what they set out to do, and claiming it the over-sufficiency of excellence: the task of checking. For, in the end, what is always at stake, with magnifying glass,⁸ pen or microphone in hand, when it comes to journalism, is ethics, responsibility, the commitment to the right of the people of our time to reliable information, which means always having in view, rather than trying to purge, those thousand and one contradictions.

4 The question of credibility

After discussing the work of the fact checking agencies, Palácios (2018) asks if a trend towards outsourcing journalistic credibility would not be underway, given the framework opened by the internet. However, he does not debate this concept, but applies it as if it was a self-evident principle of modern journalism, indispensable for the news commodity to have value: "The question here is simply to point out that accuracy is an essential element for maintaining journalistic quality and news credibility, or the news merchandise risks losing its market value".

It is a logical reasoning, which starts from the premise that the public not only wants reliable information but also shares the sense of credibility classically defined by companies that claim to be benchmarks in this business.

But is it really so?

Long before the explosion of social networks, Cornog (2005), dealing with the context of the American press already affected by the internet, reported the publishers' efforts to gain readers and asked: what if the problem is not with the newspapers but with the

readers? Why did readers change? Why – as researches he mentioned in his article – most of them did not want to make the effort to stay informed about politics or economics? Why did ignorance spread so widely at a time when higher education was so pursued?

Cornog seeks deeper roots in this behavior change and stresses the abandonment of the founding fathers' old values and their replacement by the market citizenship, synchronized with the prevailing Republican administrations decades ago. It is not difficult to link it with the emergence of neoliberalism, under the aegis of finance capital, in parallel with the development of digital technology that would provide this intense dispersion of attention that we are witnessing today.

It is important not to lose sight of these facts, because it is on this concrete basis – the global mode of production that disjoins the traditional forms of social life – that one can think not only of journalism, but of any human activity. And to think means to project, to glimpse horizons, which necessarily implies dealing with the new audiences, the young graduates in this environment each day more complicated by the technological development.

But it is not only because information consumption has changed, especially among the youngsters – as the latest Reuters Institute polls show (Newman, 2018) –, that one needs to reconsider the value of journalistic credibility. It is because this topic really needs to be addressed more deeply.

This is what Silvia Lisboa and Marcia Benetti sought to do, from the following questions:

If it is important to take journalism as a form of knowledge (...) then *how* is this knowledge established? *How* does journalism become knowledge? How does this process work? What elements does the subject need and what needs to be done so that, in the end, it is representative of the cognitive and epistemic status of journalism?

(...) journalism needs to meet three conditions in order to become knowledge: conditions of belief, truth and justification. Basically, the subject believes that journalism tells the truth, and that this truth is justified by its discourse. (Lisboa & Benetti, 2015, p. 11).

The authors consider that, precisely because it is constantly pointed out as the most important value of journalism, credibility requires a refined theoretical treatment. Lisboa (2012) sought this refinement by proposing the distinction of two aspects of the concept: constituted credibility – from traditional press companies, and which relates to the canonical values of the journalistic ethos – and perceived credibility – effectively attributed by the public. She points out that

credibility has an intersubjective nature, since it is formed in the context of a relationship and depends on the perspective of another subject.

Lisboa and Benetti (2015, p. 12) also point out that “credibility of vehicles and journalists has been looked upon skeptically since the 17th century, as Peucer (2004) shows so well in his text written in 1690”. What they intend to demonstrate in their article “is the necessity of presuming credibility *in order for journalism to be a specific knowledge* and nothing else”. They argue that “as belief, truth and justification are materialized through credibility (...). How can a subject presume that journalism is credible? By trusting that the journalistic discourse tells the truth” (idem, ibidem).

In the field of semiotics, Fontanille addresses the issue of credibility from the concept of “belief regime”, which varies according to the communicational genre.

To each genre corresponds, on the side of the text, a number of rules and signs that allows us to recognize what is the proposed regime of belief, and, on the side of the practice of interpretation, a kind of imaginary and interior disposition allowing to accept the promise and adopt the belief regime. That is why, let's say, to enter a work of fiction, one must suspend the disbelief that might inspire the confrontation between the world of that work and that of everyday experience, and tentatively accept a new (fictional) type of belief. (Fontanille, 2017, p. 9).

The problem, the author says, is that “the media subverts this state of affairs” – and one could conclude that this is a fundamental aspect of the media convergence process, which promotes “globalized and instantaneous communication”. At the heart of the problem, then, is “the systematic hybridization of contemporary media belief regimes” that misleads the user “in favor of the manipulation of beliefs, that is, of a persuasion strategy that acts on semiotic destabilization of the interpreter” (Fontanille, 2017, p. 12).

Marcos Kalil Filho (2017) shows how this hybridization favors fake news:

The problem of fake news stems from an even larger phenomenon that is the loss of boundaries between these “belief regimes” and their texts. In journalism, it all starts with the incorporation of languages that are not appropriate to the field. The inherent speed in eminently entrepreneurial business models, the blurring of the boundary between entertainment and journalism, sensationalism, and the viewer's passionate solicitude for news that should be sober and should offer rational problematization. News get mixed into other genres, other ways to reach the consumer. Add to this the economic weakening of the big media: their place of truth is completely at stake. Technological advancement allows anyone to emulate

journalism's "belief regime" quickly: a tidy blog, a more or less edited Youtube video, a well-written text on Facebook, a bold website whose funding is not very clear; these and other media disguise a journalism that no longer knew what it was even before the overwhelming arrival of the internet.

It is precisely in this field that infotelecommunications complex operates. After an exhaustive study of this system that acts powerfully in the conformation of taste, updating and radicalizing the work of the old cultural industry of pre-digital times, Schneider (2015) seeks to indicate ways of facing it, and suggests hypotheses that focus on media education, or, more precisely, on the development of critical information skills. However, even for this, it would be necessary to attract the public interest and attention with persuasion and seduction tactics, precisely those that the infotelecommunications system dominates.

5 To (not) conclude: piercing the bubble, an open question

An animation that has gone viral on the internet (Casale, 2017) humorously summarizes the way false information is disseminated and the unsuccessful attempt to pierce the bubbles of conviction in social networks. One person tells a friend that read on his *Facebook* timeline that snakes have legs. The friend runs to spread the news, the other encourages him saying that "it's true". Then comes a snake and one is amazed: "Are u a snake? I heard that u have legs, man!". And the snake explains him that he must not believe everything he sees in the internet, that he needs to know how to evaluate and verify the information, that he needs to stop being dumb... and the reaction is automatic: "unfriend" – he makes disappear the one who contradicted his belief. Then he reaffirms: "snakes have legs".

The snake's unsuccessful attempt to argue resembles recurring calls for people to confirm the information before spreading it, not to believe the first thing that appears, not to act hastily. But those are useless appeals to reason. Safatle (2017) gives a clue to understand the reason for this endless work:

It is a childish enlightenment misconception the belief that one does not think like me because he did not understand very well the chain of reasonings. So if I explain it slowly and slowly, he will agree with me. Well, nothing more wrong. What sets us apart is the adherence to radically different life forms. Anyone who wants a fascist⁹ didn't make that choice because he misunderstood the chain of reasonings. He chose it because it adheres to life forms and affections typical of this political horizon. It is not by arguing that something changes, but by deactivating the affects that underpin such choices.

This argument can help us rethink credibility in information consumption – which reflects in the consumption of journalistic information. It can help us to think about attributed credibility not to the traditional press, but to what circulates on social networks: why this huge amount of people – which is statistically not the majority but was the one that prevailed – that led Trump and Bolsonaro to power believes in the most outrageous absurdities and, on the other hand, completely rejects everything that comes from *a priori* condemned sources, that is, everything that does not come from sources previously legitimated in the bubbles themselves. If it were just misinformation, the solution would not be so hard: encouraging media education would be enough and the mistakes would soon be gone. But there is something deeper that rational appeal cannot affect, and that the cog serving the interests of finance capital works very effectively.

Safatle proposes to think of society as a “circuit of affects”. At the beginning of his book (2015, p. 15), he quotes an excerpt from *The Process* where Kafka’s character discovers that the court “is much larger than the environment which the law is stated (or should be stated)”. For in the court “the laundress, the tenements, the circuits of affections that connect the silk stockings to the judge of instruction, Joseph K.’s office, the priest who will tell him the parable about the gate of the Law” (...). “The court is a body made up of judges, laundresses, bailiffs, priests”, and this is why literature and art make us see society better than the academic work that does not have the sensitivity to incorporate them in its analysis.

To think of society as a circuit of affections is to think that social adhesion is built through affections.

In this sense, when societies change, opening themselves to the production of singular forms of life, affections begin to circulate in another way, in order to produce other objects and effects. A society that collapses are also vanishing feelings and unprecedented affections that arises. Therefore, when a society collapses, it takes with itself the subjects it created to reproduce feelings and sufferings. (Safatle, 2015, p. 17).

From a Marxist point of view, this argument would correspond to thinking about the relevance of the ideological superstructure for maintaining order or, on the contrary, for confronting it. It is a crucial theoretical discussion, that flees the limits of this article. However, from either point of view, this formulation can demonstrate the misunderstanding of the critique that attempts to warn “what really

matters” in face of the supposed smokescreen created by the propaganda of a delusional agenda regarding the danger posed by immigrants or gays, for this was the basis that elected Trump and Bolsonaro, and it is with these ideological weapons that these governments operate: electing enemies and manipulating the feeling of fear very effectively.

Thinking of journalism, which is the focus of this article, the discourse of the instituted power starts from a real basis – that the press, unlike what it claims, has interests and, especially in the Brazilian case, does not act according to the principles it holds – in order to generalize the automatic and absolute disqualification of everything that comes from this source, as well as anything else that may represent criticism. However, without this hypothesis of criticism – that is, without this filter that journalistic activity represents when ethically exercised – it is impossible to imagine any change.

The matter is how to pierce this bubble refractory to any contestation. Perhaps if critical discourse incorporates seduction, if it can embody the understanding that the court is made up of judges and laundresses, silk stockings, and priests, it can begin to combat alienation.

NOTES

- 1 Most authors tend to dismiss this denomination from movements that have led to governments such as Mario Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Bolsonaro in Brazil, preferring to classify them as far-right populism or illiberal democracy by arguing that Fascism is a historical form limited to a certain period of the twentieth century. I cannot extend myself on this subject, but I point out the criticism of this kind of definition, as Manuel Loff presented at a round table during the Marx International Congress 2018 – Legacy, Criticism and Presentity, held in December of that year at the University of Minho. He regards populism as a “curtain concept” that overlooks the reference to class and class struggle and ends up rejecting the very naming of these movements as fascists. Unlike those who see it as a crystallized concept to which certain characteristics would necessarily have to correspond, I think that fascism is an ideology that arises in a particular historical context and then unfolds, takes roots, becomes a form of life and expresses itself in the most various discourses and behaviors that distill hatred and prejudice and lead history to repeat itself in such a short time.
- 2 As it is well known, “post-truth” was defined as “the word of the

year” (2016) by the *Oxford Dictionary*, because its use grew in the “context of the Brexit referendum in the UK and the presidential election in the US”, but the dictionary itself recalls that the phrase is much older: it was first used in 1992, in an article by Steve Tesich in *The Nation* magazine, on the Persian Gulf War (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). In a valuable dialogue for this article, Celso Frederico points out that the prefix of this expression is not casual, and that it refers to a well-known Nietzsche’s quote: “there are no facts, only versions”.

- 3 Tracking Brazilian presidential campaign showed the use of blatant lies spread mainly by *WhatsApp*, such as, to name a few, the gay kit the PT candidate would have created to distribute to 6-year-old children, the penis-shaped baby bottle that the PT would distribute in kindergarten and municipal schools, the PT candidate’s alleged statement that children would be state property. *WhatsApp*’s misuse during the campaign was documented by *Folha de S. Paulo* reporter Patrícia Campos Mello in a report published ten days before the second round of the election ([https://www1.folha.uol.com.br / power/2018/10/company-bank-campaign-to-by-whatsapp.shtml](https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/power/2018/10/company-bank-campaign-to-by-whatsapp.shtml)).
- 4 About this issue, see W. Joseph Campbell, “Twain’s famous 1897 quote: The back story” (<https://mediamythalert.com/2010/06/01/twains-famous-1897-quote-the-back-story/>).
- 5 In March 2018 *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* revealed that Cambridge Analytica illegally obtained data from approximately 50 million *Facebook* profiles in the US from seemingly harmless personality tests available on that social media. Cambridge Analytica had already been in the media spotlight the year before because of its strategy in Trump and Brexit’s winning campaigns in 2016, in which the company would have used data available on *Facebook* to draw voter profiles and produce targeted advertising.
- 6 Dilma Rousseff’s candidacy for the succession of President Lula was beginning to be evaluated by the PT (the Workers Party) at the time of this report. In her youth, Dilma was a militant in one of the many armed organizations that fought the military dictatorship (1964-1985). In 1970, when she was 19, she was arrested and tortured and spent three years in jail. Dops is the Department of Political and Social Order, which acted in the violent repression of the regime’s contestants.
- 7 Convicted by judge Sérgio Moro in the Car Wash Operation, Lula was arrested on April 7, 2018.

- 8 Pun referring to *Lupa* (whose English translation is magnifying glass), one of the fact checking agencies involved on this issue.
- 9 The author refers to opinion polls that put Jair Bolsonaro as one of the best-placed candidates, one year before the campaign began. “The fascist” would eventually become president of Brazil.

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