

Chapter 8

REPORTING THE FACTS IN THE POST-TRUTH AGE: FAKE-NEWS AND THEIR IMPACT ON JOURNALISM

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“If I was allowed to choose between a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I would have no doubt in choosing the second.”

Thomas Jefferson²

INTRODUCTION

In the history of liberal Western democracies, journalism has long been considered as the fourth estate of democracy, positioned as a force to check and balance executive powers. The quote above, from Thomas Jefferson reads and underscores the position ascribed to journalism at that times. The construction of Western public sphere stems from the idea that “public” decides along with “objective facts” yielded by a free and independent press which guarantees freedom of speech. Bourgeois revolutions against monarchies and aristocracies rename the origins of legitimacy by transmitting its sources to “third estate”, namely to the people or “the nation”. The nation exerts its power through elected parliaments and a well-functioning press which watchdog the political system that is prone to corruption unless checked and balanced. All this view has been based on the basic principles of Enlightenment in which science, facts, order and reason are sanctified as the core ideas in the generation of meaning. The rise of capitalism underpins this understanding of the world as a production system to increase production by utilizing every means of technical reason. By this token, Enlightenment philosophers and the bourgeois meet around the ideas of truth, reason and liberty in order the combat the “Ancien Regime” which takes its legitimacy from religion, honour and blood. The historical alliance of the bourgeois and the Enlightenment philosophers form a historical bloc in a Gramscian sense in which capitalism wages an ostensibly functioning order for people or the nation. Citizens as the political subjects of this order have been ascribed authority

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have been doing this for decades. Yet, journalists also need to adapt themselves personally to the new media ecology by increasing their digital skills like using social media, blogging or using statistical programmes to interpret data. Journalism education must also renovate itself to adopt changing circumstances. Hossein Derakshan asserts that the news is dying, because it is losing its cultural relevance after almost two centuries and thereby its commodity value and offers that “journalism should make various experiments inspired by older artistic forms such as literature, theatre, cinema, photography and even music and dance” (<http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/12/the-news-is-dying-but-journalism-will-not-and-should-not/>). This may seem utopic now but who may estimate the path of digital technologies and the change they bring?

Defying the post-truth era is a complex deed which journalism can not achieve alone. It is a direct conclusion of capitalism which alienates individuals and closes them to their counter-epistemic communities. Thus, combatting post-truth era and thwarting populist leaders require more organized efforts than reporting. Good journalism is a stone on the way which enable citizens to decide more fairly, seeing their actions as “civic duties” rather than partisanship. Journalism may present short-term solutions like increasing fact-checking abilities, fostering investigative journalism, uniting and getting organized or transforming the structure of news. Yet, journalists and journalism scholars should also keep in mind that even fact-checking sites may not help to debunk the myths and “truths” of counter-epistemic communities. For example, in the months after the British referendum and during the brutal months of the US presidential election scores of fact-checking sites became available online. But even this flowering of truth-telling machines had little impact, according to a detailed review of media performance during the Trump election carried out by the *Guardian* and the *Columbia Journalism Review* (White, 2017:14). Thus, the war against the post-truth era should be waged against capitalism as a total system, not only against the “fake-news”.

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