

Debate over the emergence of the post-truth era

Post-Truth: Politics and Communication

International Seminar, 7 November 2017, Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain



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Reflecting the emergence of the phenomenon of post-truth politics with the advent of the internet and related social and communication changes, the Institute of European Democrats in collaboration with *Sabino Arana Fundazioa* organised the International Seminar titled **“Post-Truth: Politics and Communication”** which took place on Tuesday 7 November 2017 in Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain, at the seat of Sabino Arana Fundazioa.

Speakers (in the order of speeches):

Juan Maria Atutxa, President of Sabino Arana Fundazioa.

Flaminia Baffigo, Coordinator of the Institute of European Democrats.

Rafael Suso, Company Branding, Communication and Strategy Consultant.

Juan Antonio Giner, Journalist and CEO and Founder of Innovation Media Consulting.

Miquel Urmeneta, Journalist and Lecturer in Communications at the University of Catalonia in Spain.

Marco Ricorda, Digital Identity Manager for the ALDE Group of the European Parliament.

Carmen Beatriz Fernández, CEO of DataStrategia Consultores.

The event was opened by the President of Sabino Arana Fundazioa *Juan Maria Atutxa* who debated the extent into which the political communication has changed over the last couple of years. “We are living in the era of post-truth, the facts seem no longer to be important in politics,” he pinpointed. The arrival of new technologies and the revolution of social media platforms have contributed to the rise of the phenomenon of post-truth information that greatly affects the current political discourse. In his view, only critical thinking may effectively fight against the spread of disinformation and misleading news across media and social media channels; however, people firstly need to work on their critical thinking skills and evaluate information they read responsibly and seriously.

The Coordinator of the Institute of European Democrats *Flaminia Baffigo* recalled that in late 2016, Oxford Dictionaries selected ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year, defining it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to

emotion and personal belief.” She remembered that just one year before in the same room a Seminar on Brexit took place at the same day of the announcement of the results of the elections in the United States. She highlighted that both these events indicate how the digital age has affected news and cultural narratives. New information platforms feed the ancient instinct and people have to find information in unison with their perspectives. This is a big challenge ahead for producers and users of information through internet, online applications and platforms. And she ended pointing up that the Trump era is a never-ending source of post-truth story-telling.

“We all have personal responsibility to decide what is true and what is not.”

Rafael Suso

importance to him and his administration. An important question is whether people tend to trust Trump’s tweets more than the news delivered by respectable newspapers – in case of his supporters, there is no doubt that they trust Trump’s statements without a need to verify their accuracy in serious newspapers. In Mr Suso’s opinion, the most famous networking sites worldwide Facebook and Twitter thus directly influence democratic system and its strength. Today, we live in an informative disorder and we all can



very easily become the editors of fake news if we broadcast unverified information online so they are visible to other social media users. “We all have personal responsibility to decide what is true and what is not,” he emphasized, “that is why we need to work harder on developing our critical thinking skills so we are able to easily differentiate what is true information and what is fake news.”

Journalism and Digital Challenge – How to solve the crisis of journalism?

The first speaker of the roundtable, journalist, CEO and founder of the Innovation Media Consulting **Juan Antonio Giner** talked about the strategies which traditional journalism should use in responding to the digital revolution. His company Innovation Media Consulting advices media houses to reinvent their editorial models, products, designs, newsrooms and narratives for the digital age and thus help them to increase their reach, relevance and revenue through innovation; their clients include so respectable media such as New York Times, BBC or Le Monde. On the basis of his extensive experience in journalism, Mr Giner believes that one of the reasons for the spread of fake news is business – sensational news simply makes more money. He also detected 10 most crucial errors in the current journalism due to which traditional newspapers are still lagging behind new technologies (check the table on page 3).

“We need to be much more careful with social media because via lies spread online, we are entering the world of propaganda.”

Juan Antonio Giner

According to Mr Giner, there is other big failure many newspapers commit nowadays – e.g. they title some article as ‘analysis’ even when it is a pure commentary. However, the analysis needs to be based on the facts not on the expression of personal and

often biased opinions of one journalist. “Facts are expensive and opinions are cheap,” he reminded the quote of one journalist in this regard. Furthermore, while the majority of respectable and serious newspapers require the online fee from their readers nowadays, the alternative media or portals with fake news are in majority of cases for free. This represents a huge problem which needs to be addressed because people in general do not want to pay to be able to read the news online. In this way, people who cannot afford to pay or refuse to pay the reader’s fee are literally pushed to turn from the serious newspapers to the so-called ‘alternative’ ones.

10 MAIN ERRORS IN CURRENT JOURNALISM / MEDIA WORLD:

1. Ignorance of the fact that the real owners of newspapers are their readers.
2. Lack of interaction among readers, advertisers, audiences and communities.
3. Following the trend to talk about “them” and “us”.
4. Low quality of the news presented.
5. Low cost of drafting of newspapers articles.
6. Lack of developers working on better drafting and presentation strategies of the articles.
7. Lack of experts on technology and professionals on technological systems and innovations.
8. Lack of integration.
9. Fear of competition from other newspapers and media platforms.
10. Following the strategy of avoiding risks and waiting that others will do mistakes.

Lack of transparency of social media platforms is also a very significant challenge. The example of the last American presidential campaign proves that Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and other networking sites can be abused to manipulate people. “We need to be critical to these powers; history teaches us that if something or somebody acquires too much power through democratic ways, then that power is used to abuse democracy,” he stressed, “we need to be much more careful with social media because via lies spread online, we are entering the world of propaganda.”

Mr Giner then presented 6 visionary ideas inspired by the Chief Executive Officer of Amazon Jeff Bezos on what newspapers should do in order to overcome the digital challenge and adjust journalism to the new age:

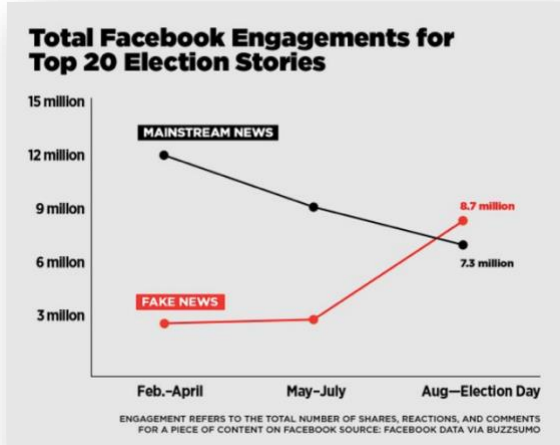
- Innovation is teamwork and not the fruit of a solitary wizard.
- Public must be at the centre of change.
- Growth is more important than survival.
- Innovation and experience are necessary to reach effective change.
- Patience is a key.
- Think and invest in a long-term perspective.

In the view of Mr Giner, in order to have high-quality and reliable newspapers, the heads of media houses need to rely more on experts, be pro-active and willing to invest into innovations. Last but not least, more talented journalists who have enough freedom in their work are necessary prerequisite to improve quality of any newspapers in the world.

→ [Click here to access the Full Presentation “Journalism and the Digital Challenge: All the problems of journalism are solved with more and better journalism” \(in Spanish\)](#)

Has the truth died? Public faced with the post-truth.

Miquel Urmeneta, journalist and lecturer in communication at the University of Catalonia, put the attention on the relationship between political campaigning and social media. He pinpointed that two lie-based political campaigns – the campaign for Brexit and the Trump’s presidential campaign – influenced the face and means of spreading the news in the most significant way.



During the Brexit campaign, the lie about alleged 350 million pounds which Britain was sending every week to the EU instead of the National Health Service NHS (which Nigel Farage, who had created the lie, dismissed few hours after the vote) practically decided about the result of referendum. With regards to Trump, he was feeding his campaign by the lies about what he said or did not say in past, whether he supported or did not support the invasion to Iraq, about the place of birth of Barack Obama or the lies targeted to his opponent Hillary Clinton; the success of these lies in final had the major impact on his narrow victory. The US media also shares the

part of responsibility for the Trump’s victory – not only they failed in pinpointing to the lies that he was spreading for months but according to all respectable American newspapers, Clinton had 85 % chance to win in the elections and almost no serious commentator doubted she would become the next president. This proves that the media projected their own desires and convictions that made Trump an outsider what eventually helped him to win in final.

“Today, politics is a lot about emotions which are used to manipulate people, especially those lost in globalisation.”

Miquel Urmeneta

Another worrying pattern is that according to the surveys, as many as 44% of American people got most important information about the presidential campaign via Facebook. This is a significant number considering the fact that Facebook is a breeding ground for easy broadcasting and spreading of unverified, misleading and fake information. In addition, in the period from August 2016 to the election day, a higher number of Facebook users (8.7 millions) read about top 20 election stories via fake news

portals than via mainstream newspapers (7.3 million users; check the graph above).



Facebook as a smoking gun, (*The Economist* cover, 2017)

In this regard, the November’s cover of the *Economist* which depicts the Facebook logo as a smoking gun with a title “Social media’s threat to democracy” (see the picture on the left) is very eloquent. In Mr Urmeneta’s view, it seems that the social media sites – instead of improving politics – have become a dangerous weapon in political discourse; a great deal of responsibility why Britons voted for Brexit and Americans for Trump is on the shoulders of the most popular social media platforms. “Today, politics is a lot about emotions which are used to manipulate people, especially

those lost in globalisation,” he explained. As a result, the lie-based campaigns truly represent serious threats to democracy. “Maybe, we killed the truth and now the truth is dead and we have the post-truth

instead,” he speculated. Nevertheless, despite all negative trends, Mr Urmeneta believes that we all have the power to influence and change things which are not working as they should, including the ways of management of Facebook and other social media networks.

→ [Click here to access the Full Presentation “Public and the Post-Truth” \(in Spanish\)](#)

Breaking down the Wall of the Social Media.

The expert on social media and Digital Identity Manager of the ALDE Group at the European Parliament **Marco Ricorda** spoke about the main features, benefits as well as disadvantages of the current leading networking sites. “Social media is both the opportunity and the challenge for democracy,” Mr Ricorda underlined. He reminded the quote of Winston Churchill – “a lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes” – with an emphasis that there is a high relevance of this quote for today’s world due to the fact that it is much cheaper, quicker and easier to create a lie than to search for the fact. In Mr Ricorda’s view, fake news is thus not a new phenomenon, it has always existed in the society.

With regards to post-truth in politics, he talked about the infamous private company Cambridge Analytica which combines data analysis with strategic communication for the electoral process and which worked for Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and on the Leave.EU-campaign for the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union. The role of



Cambridge Analytica in both campaigns is the subject to ongoing criminal investigations that sheds a great deal of controversy and distrust on how two campaigns were led. Among many other common features, both campaigns had in similar that they worked with emotions of people, especially with fear. “Facts do not move votes but sentiments do,” Mr Ricorda emphasized, “fear is therefore the most effective feeling used in political campaigns these days.” Both campaigns also used Facebook massively and proved that this social network is still the most effective platform to invest in during political campaigning.

“Social media is both the opportunity and the challenge for democracy.”

Marco Ricorda

Nowadays, the social media are also abused as the means for the governments of some states to influence internal political situation inside the other states; this was the case of Kremlin’s interventions to the US presidential campaign via social networks because of which the heads of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube had to testify before a Senate judiciary subcommittee about Russian disinformation online.

When debating the future, Mr Ricorda does not rule out the possibility that Facebook will disappear one day; however, he does not think it can happen in a near future. This is due to persistent popularity of this social media platform as well as the visionary thinking of its co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. In his manifesto ‘Building Global Community’, he imagines how global society will look like in the future and on the basis of this vision he then speculates how to influence that society and how Facebook can be the part of it. Such approach is very unique and it can make Facebook to continue being the leading media platform for many years

to come. In predicting possible future development of communication, he suggested to look at three issues:

- I. Information eco-systems
- II. Media companies' development
- III. Communication managers' vision

Mr Ricorda then presented five main fields into which Facebook and other media companies are investing their financial resources the most (see the table below). Facebook also wants to secure its survival by destroying its competitors by buying out all new innovations. For a clear illustration, Facebook bought two main messaging applications WhatsApp and Messenger, which are both crucial for political campaigning, and integrated them to its platform. The headquarters of Facebook did so because they realized that a 'message' is still viewed by people as more important and serious than a standard Facebook post.

Where do social media companies invest money nowadays?

- New channels / Integration of channels
- Videos
- Social ads
- Artificial intelligence
- Virtual and augmented reality

Today, information is produced independently, fast and remotely, and then it is spread by broadcasting or sharing in ubiquitous and continuous way. As Mr Ricorda emphasized, for every fact there is counter-fact and these facts and counter-facts look identical online. Within the current overload of facts and counter-facts which are not regulated on the internet, people tend to seek information that aligns with their views. "This means that information can now be regulated mainly by information literacy," he concluded.



→ [Click here to access the Full Presentation "Breaking Down the Walls of the Media" \(in English\)](#)

Political Campaigning and the Revolt of the Masses 2.0

The last speaker of the event was the Chief Executive Officer of DataStrategia Consultores **Carmen Beatriz Fernandez** who focused her presentation on political communication. In her view, the two main variables of political communication and political campaigning are *message* and *audience*. The message is the content which needs to be broadcasted and spread and the audience are people who need to receive the message. She explained three segments in detecting the right audience in political campaigning (check the table on page 7).

“More and more people consider some information as true only if they believe in that information.”

Carmen Beatriz Fernandez

When speaking about political marketing, there are two sample highlights of the development of political campaign's strategies – the campaign of 35th American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy who was a pioneer of television in 1960 and the campaign of 44th President Barack Obama who was a pioneer of Facebook and other social media in 2008. They were both outsiders in

their election races and they both eventually won thanks to clever strategy of using that day’s new media platforms that enjoyed massive popularity of voters.

THREE SEGMENTS IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING:

- **Friends:** ‘safe’ voters, voters who will always vote for you so you do not need to concentrate on them in the campaign.
- **Opponents:** they will never vote for you, so it is useless trying to persuade them in the campaign.
- **Neutrals:** these voters are most relevant in the campaign because you have a chance to persuade them; in the USA, there are the so-called “swing states” – these are elections’ battlegrounds, practically the campaign is run only in these states because they could reasonably be won by either the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate.

Ms Fernandez talked also about Russian disinformation war. In her opinion, any state becomes the empire when it has the command over technology which is for disposal; this is why Putin’s Kremlin is so efficient in making secret disruptions into the electoral campaign in other states of the world, e.g. they effectively utilize media manipulation, cyber-attacks and use of agents provocateurs in order to reach their goals.



She also introduced the term “selective perception” – under this term we understand that people tend to expose themselves to the ideas and opinions they believe in already. “More and more people consider some information as true only if they *believe* in that information,” Ms Fernandez stressed. In addition, an increasing number of people think that respectable journalists and scholars do not understand them and as a result, some readers do not trust the articles written by them; this is also the part of the reason why so many people choose the alternative media and do not follow the traditional media these days. “Post-

truth is some kind of parallel reality or the effort to create one,” she concluded, “consequently, we need to defend the true reality by careful and critical assessment of all information we receive, read and spread.”



Speakers of the seminars (left-right: J.M. Atutxa, F. Baffigo, R. Suso, J.A. Giner, M. Urmeneta, M. Ricorda, C.B. Fernandez)

In summary, the seminar managed to address – with the assistance of several outstanding experts on communication, political campaigning and social media – what we can understand under the term ‘post-truth era’, what communication strategies are used nowadays in political campaigns, why information literacy is so important, what impact digital revolution have on journalism, and how we can effectively address the issue of ‘fake news’ in the online platforms. The event was attended by the representatives of NGOs, Embassies, civic society and media.

The event was organized with the financial support of the European Parliament.

Main outcomes and proposals:

- The term ‘post-truth’ reflects the situation in which objective facts are less influential and important in shaping public opinion than intentionally misleading, exaggerated, sensationalist and deceptive information which veracity and accuracy are of secondary importance;
- New technologies and social media platforms have contributed to the rise of the phenomenon of post-truth information and became dangerous weapon in political discourse;
- Two lie-based political campaigns – the Leave.EU-campaign for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU and Donald Trump’s presidential campaign – had a far-reaching impact on the face and means of spreading the news;
- The most famous networking sites worldwide Facebook and Twitter directly influence democratic system and its strength because they are increasingly abused for manipulation of public opinion;
- The networking sites are also abused as the means for the governments of some states to influence internal affairs inside the other states (e.g. the Kremlin’s interventions into the US and European elections);
- We all can very easily become the editors of fake news if we broadcast unverified information online so they are visible to other social media users;
- It is cheaper, easier, faster and financially more advantageous to create and publish a lie than to search for the fact which requires money, time and effort and in final, the fact does not sell so well than the sensational lie;
- In order to improve the quality of newspapers and adjust them to the digital revolution, the newspapers should invest into innovation, hire more experts on technology, increase interaction, be more pro-active, visionary and courageous, and hire more talented journalists and provide them enough freedom in their work;
- An increasing number of people use the social media sites and not traditional and respectable newspapers for reading the news;
- Great deal of responsibility why Britons voted for Brexit and Americans for Trump is on the shoulders of the most popular social media platforms;
- The current populistic campaigns work with emotions of people, especially with fear because the sentiments and not the facts move votes;
- Two main variables of political communication and campaigning are *message* and *audience* – when speaking about the audience, neutral voters are those who matter in the campaign;
- People usually consider some information as true when they *believe* in that information even though that information may be fake one;
- Only critical thinking and information literacy may effectively fight against the spread of disinformation;
- We need to be much more careful when using social media platforms, they lack transparency and information broadcasted and spread via them are not regulated and controlled properly.

Prepared by Adriana Čiefová (IED, 2017)

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