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**“POST-TRUTH” AS AN ONTOLOGICAL ERROR
IN A GLOBAL MEDIA AND ACADEMIC DISCOURSE**

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The relativisation of truth and the blurring of the boundaries between truth and falsehood in the public sphere are nowadays positioned in media discourse and academic literature as a normal historical process and described by the term “post-truth”. The author proposes to subject its correctness and heuristic value to careful critical analysis. “Post-truth” according to the author denotes a fundamentally important essential substitution: truth in it is stripped of its absolute status and placed in the same line with things temporary, finite, conventional – post-communism, post-totalitarianism, post-modernism, post-secularism, etc. Therefore, the author calls to avoid the term “post-truth” since it contains not only a logical, but also an ontological error.

Keywords: post-truth, truth, journalism, media research, terminological correctness.

**«ПОСТ-ПРАВДА» КАК ОНТОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ОШИБКА
В ГЛОБАЛЬНОМ МЕДИА И АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ**

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Релятивизация правды, размывание границ между истиной и ложью в публичной сфере позиционируются в настоящее время в медиадискурсе и научной литературе как нормальный исторический процесс, и описывается термином «пост-правда». Автор предлагает подвергнуть внимательному критическому анализу его корректность и эвристическую ценность. «Постправда», по мнению автора, обозначает принципиально важную сущностную подмену: правда в нем лишается абсолютного статуса и помещается в один ряд с вещами временными, конечными, конвенциональными – посткоммунизмом, посттоталитаризмом, постмодернизмом, постсекуляризмом и др. Поэтому автор настаивает на том,

что термин «пост-правда» содержит не только логическую, но и онтологическую ошибку.

Ключевые слова: постправда, правда, журналистика, медиа-исследования, терминологическая корректность.

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The heuristic value of each new notion introduced into academic discourse, regardless of its popularity, determines to a large extent of its future. Therefore, a critical analysis of new terminology is a crucial task of scholarly dialogue. In this paper, we will attempt to examine the history and extent of the use of the word “post-truth” in major media, as well as critically analyse its use in academic publications, paying particular attention to the following questions: What heuristic value does this term represent? What is its ontological essence?

Sensational messages and vivid terms, which seem to bring a new interpretation of events, phenomena and processes, are being rapidly spread claiming to offer an innovative language to describe a new reality mankind faces. Such a “media splash”, or even, judging by its duration, a “media storm” [9, p. 453] is associated with the term “post-truth”.

In general, the media surge of post-truth (hereinafter this term will be used without quotation marks) is associated with the difficulty of distinguishing between truth and lies, about which A.G. Bystritsky recently wrote: “We are talking about fake news, information confusion and cognitive dissonance, which a large part of the population experiences because of the inability to distinguish truth from lies” [11, p. 132-133].

Post-truth (as both a scientific term and a vivid metaphor for journalistic discourse) has been perceived in recent years as an axiom, a given, a commonplace, and even a truism, but not a subject to question or critical analysis. Unfortunately, its widespread use in publications is not supported by arguments in favour of its special heuristic value.

Post-truth has come to be called a state of affairs in which boring truth is replaced by spectacular lies: “All these phenomena and many others point to a new political era or paradigm: we are facing a post-truth society or an era of post-facts, in which Truth and Reason are displaced by alternative facts and individual inner feelings” [15, p. 2]. Today post-truth describes an era of mass communication development in which truth is no longer fundamentally important. *Post-truth is an information flow that is intentionally constructed in modern society through media and other channels to create a virtual, different reality* [q.v.: 7; 8; 18].

When reading materials about post-truth, one gets the feeling that political scientists, sociologists and publicists are competing in the use of a fashionable construct. However, if we stop and look around, we must admit that there are questions about the term. Has there really been a global tectonic shift in attitudes toward truth and the foundations of journalism? Are we really, as a number of academic papers and journalistic articles have argued, living in an “age of post-facts” and in a “post-truth society”, where truth and causality have been replaced by individual feelings and sympathies? Are these processes historically determined and irreversible?

Truth: absolute or relative?

At first glance the symptoms of “relativisation” and devaluation of truth are visible. Audiences have become less trusting of scientific evidence, preferring conspiracy interpretations (e.g. about climate change), rigorous medical diagnoses are losing popularity to recipes from the Internet, and quality journalism based on fact checking is drowning in a flood of disinformation produced by “fake news farms”, “troll factories” and cleverly wielding bots online.

Post-truth worlds are commonly seen as discursive formations created, disseminated and prevalent in the information space. Their internal logic and hidden normative preconditions are based on the relativization of truth and actually contradict the classical notions of journalism. This new “non-Euclidean geometry” is ontologically questionable. The fact that the public sphere faces a profound “crisis of facts” [q.v.: 12] does not derive from the need to accept post-truth theory unconditionally and uncritically as an irrefutable given.

In fact, the idea of a post-truth era contains an underlying nostalgia for the era of truth. The very idea of the post-truth era also fails to deny that the default information order is based on the notion of the essential absoluteness of truth. Not even for a moment can we imagine, for example, that in the binary system “0” and “1” have reversed values: the relativization of mathematics and informatics leads to a chaos of uncertainty. And in this sense, the world of facts is also “binary”, unambiguous. Of course, the same cannot be said of the world of interpretations, but journalism is built primarily on facts, and interpretations are the prerogative not only of journalists and experts, but also of the audience itself. Consequently, the assumption that the possibility of different interpretations of a predominantly emotional nature proves that the relativity of truth as such is questionable.

Nevertheless, the major media outlets in Europe and the United States condemn the new era of disinformation, publishing numerous notes, articles and commentaries on the post-truth era. There is no shortage of commentators and intellectuals denouncing the onslaught of fake news and post-truth and publishing books with catchy titles: *“Post-truth: how bullshit conquered the world”* [10]; *“Post-truth: why we have reached peak bullshit and what we can do about it”* [13]; *“Post-truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back”* [14]; *“The death of truth: notes on falsehood in the age of Trump”* [19].

There is also a growing analytical reflection in academia on the uncontrolled and uncritical flow of lies that audiences perceive. Researchers willingly place the word post-truth on the title page of their papers, introducing it into scholarly usage as a term of heuristic and interpretive value, but they do not subject post-truth to a

thorough terminological analysis: “*Post-truth*” [22]; “*Post-truth: knowledge as a power game*” [16]; “*Everything is permitted, restrictions still apply: a psychoanalytic perspective on social dislocation, narcissism, and post truth*” [25]; “*Fake news: falsehood, fabrication and fantasy in journalism*” [23]; “*Post-truth, fake news and democracy: mapping the politics of falsehood*” [15] etc.

Unfortunately, uncritical borrowing has brought the term into Russian academic usage as well. In particular, we should mention economist Andrei Movchan’s book “*Russia in the age of post-truth. Common sense against information noise*” [4] and the proceedings of the conference “*Post-truth politics and populism in the modern world*”, which was held in St. Petersburg in 2017 and was mainly devoted to populism in politics, but the term post-truth has earned its place in the book title [5].

As for the sources where the terms are actually used the most influent media are in the lead (see table below). However, if in the English-language rating the press is ahead of the news TV channels and news agencies (“*Times*”, “*Guardian*” and “*New York Times*” are above *CNN*), in the Russian-language segment “*RIA Novosti*” and “*IA Regnum*” are ahead of “*Kommersant*” and “*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*”. And this observation can also serve as a confirmation of the uncritical borrowing of the word post-truth in the Russian-language information discourse from foreign sources.

*Post-truth in English-language media (2015-2021),
according to FACTIVA - global news monitoring
and search engine run by Dow Jones*

Source	Number of publications
CE Noticias Financieras (Latin America)	1224
The Times (U.K.)	664
The Guardian	464
The New York Times	390
The Independent	366
Financial Times	334
U-Wire (University Wire) (U.S.)	243
The Australian	242
Washington Post	237
The Telegraph (U.K.)	229
The Conversation (Australia)	197

ForeignAffairs.co.nz	189
CNN	170
Postmedia Breaking News (Canada)	147
Daily Mail	133
The Telegraph (India)	122
Times of India	122
Toronto Star	110
NewsRx Medical Newsletters	107
Hindustan Times	106

The analysis of the use of the word post-truth in a global context in FACTIVA global news monitoring and search engine confirms the extent of the “fascination” with this construct. A sharp media spike in the use of the word occurred from 2016 to 2018 (Brexit in the United Kingdom and Trump’s election in the United States), but even after the peak, the use of the term has not returned to the level of 2014, meaning that the post-truth usage has expanded and again shows an upward trend.

In terms of languages of use, according to FACTIVA, Spanish and English are firmly in the lead, with Spanish (36.5%) already ahead of English (33.2%) by now. French (3.4%) and German (1.6%) are followed by Portuguese (5.2%) and Chinese (3.8%) and Russian is 1.4% of all post-truth uses. This distribution by language generally corresponds to the general proportions of resources in these languages in the general body of texts, indicating a more or less equal penetration of post-truth in the global information discourse.

How a journalistic metaphor became an academic term

The neologism “post-truth” was first used in 1992 by Steve Tesich, an American of Serbian origin, in his publicist work on the U.S. war in the Persian Gulf [24]. And he evidently used this word as a new impressive journalistic metaphor.

The first scholarly attempt to make sense of the new concept was an article in the 1996 reprint of the Oxford Dictionary. The word “post-truth” was defined in the English Dictionary as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”... The term was further popularized in Ralph Keyes’ book “The post-truth era: dishonesty and deception in contemporary life” [20]. According to Keyes, society is entering the post-truth era as lies begins to dominate everyday and political

life. He also writes about the so-called “technical deception” that allows lying without consequences as a result of the anonymity of the Internet.

The term “post-truth” has since been used to describe a communication situation in which truth is no longer fundamentally important. Post-truth began to refer to the information flow, which is intentionally constructed in modern society with the help of the media and other channels to create a virtual reality in order to manipulate the public consciousness [2]. In the era of post-truth, objective facts are less important in shaping public opinion than appealing to emotions and personal beliefs, meaning that people believe what they want to believe and are more willing to remain captive to their stereotypes and biases instead of trusting numbers and concrete data.

As a result, there is more information, but it is less and less verified. Information is no longer valuable in and of itself; it is the attention paid to it and the emotional context that is more important. According to Farkas and Schou, the world is entering a post-truth era largely due to the proliferation of social media and online platforms, where people receive often deliberately distorted information about world events, as the fragmentation of news sources creates a situation where lies, gossip, and rumours online can very quickly substitute for truth. Rationality no longer prevails in the analysis and evaluation of information, the role of emotion in the perception of not only information, but reality itself is increasing. Facts, evidence, and data as objective reflections of events are being equated with opinions, reviews, and rumours, and the measure of truth becomes individual with his or her personal perception and the “information bubble”.

The world today faces a profound crisis of disinformation: false and unverified information spreads like a virus, creating problems for society, primarily due to a devaluation of trust in fact. In other words, the usual appeal to the minds of fellow citizens is becoming less and less effective. Freedom of speech in modern society is ensured to a large extent by an unprecedented leap in the development of the media. But it is modern media, in turn, that create the preconditions for the crisis of this freedom, because it becomes the ground for the spread of lies. Many attribute the

cause of the advent of the post-truth era to fake news. The existence of lies in social life and the media is not a new phenomenon, but the situation is getting worse because information can now spread with a speed and reach never seen before.

Does the crisis of journalism mean the post-truth victory?

The growth and rapid increase of fake news, i.e. lies, can be explained by the decline of the role of journalism in society and the decline of professional standards. For all its shortcomings, journalism was and remains a systemic social institution, and its decline has a detrimental effect on society.

Along with the crisis of traditional media, there has been a decline in trust in journalistic activities and journalism as a whole. The decline in trust in the media automatically leads to an uninformed audience, and people become more vulnerable to extremist messages and false news. “The most important thing in a functional society is a well-informed public. What we have now is not only uninformed but also misinformed masses”, – Farkas and Schou note [2, p. 60]. The current media landscape makes it impossible to adequately select sources because of their sheer number, which creates information or misinformation overload. Therefore, according to Farkas and Schou, quality journalism is threatened by fake news and bots, and “the traditional guardians of truth, editors and journalists, have lost their monopoly on truth” [2, p. 60].

At the same time, the number of influential actors interested in post-truth has always been large. They include politicians seeking popularity and votes; sellers of goods and services eager to sell more and more money; the media in pursuit of circulation; journalists in pursuit of a career or fame; bloggers in the struggle for subscribers and advertisers; officials to prove loyalty or steal; oppositionists to tilt society in their favour; foreign intelligence agencies to weaken states; their own security forces to strengthen the state, etc. [1, p. 60].

S. Chugrov conceptualized the post-truth as a “special quasi-real environment, a postmodern deviation, a deformed and stereotyped state of consciousness in which stereotypes have already broken away from real images... Post-truth is a certain context, modality, and situation that makes it possible to spread false news, with no

retaliatory sanctions. In such a modal (relativistic) context, it does not matter whether the news is true or false. It is important that it meets two characteristics: the emotional mood of the information consumer and the political goals of the communicator” [8, p. 46]. Post-truth discourse is defined as a discourse in which “truthiness” is more important than truth [21, p. 596].

Indeed, media audiences are strongly emotionally attached to their deeply held beliefs. There is a valid reason for this phenomenon: such beliefs may have been internalized by the psyche while the child was still being raised by parents, but also because of other people who had an influence on the formation of the personality: teachers, religious and cultural leaders, colleagues. Throughout the period of personality formation, all that was shaped by life experience had to provide systematic reinforcement of learned cognitive attitudes, including political preferences, ethical and moral standards, and a picture of the world as a whole.

In our opinion, the viral spread of the word post-truth could have significant consequences for modern journalism, calling into question the ontological essence of this profession. Nick Davies, an experienced and uncompromising British journalist and author of the popular book “Flat Earth News” expressed it very precisely and clearly: “The main purpose of a journalist is to try to tell the truth about important things to the audience” [12, p. 21]. Truth is the main category of this definition, and if it ceases to be taken seriously, if it is interpreted relativistically, then the profession of journalism itself essentially loses its foundation.

Journalism, as well as science, religion, law, is not sentenced by its nature to capitulate to lies. But every use of the term post-truth in media discourse, in the sense of a new information reality in which truth is relative and unimportant, is precisely, in our view, a step toward surrender. And this surrender will mean a systemic shift, an aberration in the global online information space, when the picture of the world is distorted by the essential substitution of concepts and its incorrect description.

Temporary or eternal?

Post-truth has changed sources and forms, but it has existed and perhaps dominated in all times: we can easily find post-truth as we understand it today in the

Ancient World, in the Middle Ages, and even in the Enlightenment, much less in New and Contemporary times. From the rhetorical techniques of the sophists to contemporary propaganda discourse, information that resonates with the emotional expectations of the audience and corresponds to the political goals of the communicator has always been valuable.

Legitimate questions arise. Is a new term really necessary if it describes a reality that existed before? What is its heuristic value? Does all of the above give post-truth a pass into scientific discourse? Is the introduction of the term sufficiently justified? From our point of view, the answer is “no”, and we will try to prove it below.

Even a primary terminological questioning of post-truth reveals a logical, philological and even ontological error in this word, which strangely remains unarticulated in academic publications, much less in journalistic texts.

Let us turn to the meaning of the prefix “post-”. It means of coming, following after something: postinfection, postradiation, postembryonic, postposition, postimpressionism [6]. An identical meaning of this word-forming morpheme is given by the “Dictionary of foreign words”. A prefix having the meaning “after”, e.g.: postimpressionism, postposition [3, c. 615].

Thus, even the most superficial attempt to deconstruct the term post-truth exposes a fundamentally important essential substitution: truth with the prefix “post” loses its absolute status and is placed on a par with things temporal, finite, relational, conventional. The prefix “post” is correctly and adequately used in such words as “post-communism”, “post-totalitarianism”, “post-modernism”, “post-secularism”. But it is impossible to call it correct in the word post-truth. The words “communism”, “totalitarianism”, “modernism” and “secularism” have an obvious temporal aspect, which is inapplicable to truth. It is an error.

As a consequence of this error, the prefix “post” means not only “after”, but also “beyond” in the sense that truth is no longer relevant. The relativization of truth, the blurring of the boundaries between truth and falsehood are thus positioned as a

normal historical process: there was one truth, it ended, and now there are many and all are different.

Conclusion

The German philosopher and rationality apologist Jürgen Habermas emphasized that “democracy without truth can no longer be democracy” [17, p. 18]. In an era of viral proliferation of lies, there remain a number of social institutions that can be called the “last bastions” of truth, where, contrary to the rules of politics, truth and veracity have always remained the ultimate yardstick for evaluating speeches and efforts. These are the spaces of honest science, systematically directed toward the search for truth; the judiciary, whose procedures aim to make just decisions; and religious communities, for whom truth is an absolute. These subsystems of society increase the chances of truth prevailing in the public sphere, even if their present state seems deplorable to us.

The concept of post-truth, by denoting complex and ambiguous processes, even if it is accompanied by negative connotations, legitimizes in public opinion and scientific discourse a state of affairs that is ontologically impossible in those frames of reference where absolutes are supposed to exist, including the standard system of contemporary journalism, which implies the distinction between true and false. In advocating a critical attitude to the term post-truth, we are not trying to “undo” negative processes in the global information space. We propose to describe them in other terms – ontologically acceptable, adequate and heuristically valuable.

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