

# IS TRUTH RELEVANT IN THE POSTMODERN EDUCATIONAL WORLD?

¿ES RELEVANTE LA VERDAD EN EL MUNDO EDUCATIVO POSMODERNO?  
A VERDADE É RELEVANTE NO MUNDO EDUCACIONAL PÓS-MODERNO?

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## ABSTRACT

We belong to a time when everything is questionable, and the truth seems threatened. Gramsci's admonition is fulfilled: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." The pragmatism of our time prefers useful lies to the moral value of truth, manipulating emotions that the public is not capable of detecting or does not have the time to value. "We live in a world in which the highest function of a character is to allow the reality to disappear, and at the same time, to mask the disappearance at that." To define this type of "farce," the term post-truth is used, which is presented as an interpretable truth that is not due to demonstrable facts, and as just another consumer product, an apparent truth to the liking of postmodern man. In the post-truth era, schools must help students discern the information they receive from the media and learn to look for evidence of the truth. Given the broad access to digital media available to students, these assessment skills are more necessary today than ever. If children are the future, the future could be poorly informed, but can we do something?

**KEYWORDS (SOURCE: DECS):** Truth; post-truth; education; social networks; fake news; information.

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- 3 "La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi piú svariati".

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**RESUMEN**

Pertenece a unos tiempos donde todo es cuestionable y opinable, en los que la verdad parece estar amenazada. Se da cumplimiento a la admonición de Gramsci: “Lo nuevo no acaba de nacer, lo viejo no acaba de morir, y en estos claroscuros surgen los monstruos” (1)<sup>3</sup>. El pragmatismo de nuestra época prefiere la mentira útil al valor moral de la verdad, y manipula emociones que el público no es capaz de detectar ni tiene tiempo de valorar. “Vivimos en un mundo en el que la más elevada función del signo es hacer desaparecer la realidad y enmascarar al mismo tiempo esa desaparición” (2). Para definir este tipo de *farsa* se utiliza el término *posverdad*, que se presenta como una verdad interpretable, que no responde a hechos demostrables, y como un producto más de consumo, una verdad aparente a gusto del hombre posmoderno. En la era de la posverdad, las escuelas deben ayudar a los estudiantes a saber discernir la información que reciben de los medios y a aprender a buscar evidencia de la verdad. Este tipo de destrezas de evaluación son, en la actualidad, más necesarias que nunca, dado el amplio acceso a los medios digitales de que disponen los alumnos. Si los niños son el futuro, el futuro podría estar muy mal informado, pero ¿podemos hacer algo?

**PALABRAS CLAVE (FUENTE: DECS):** Verdad; posverdad o mentira emotiva; educación; redes sociales; noticias falsas; información.

**RESUMO**

Pertencemos a tempos em que tudo é questionável e discutível, em que a verdade parece ameaçada. A admoestação de Gramsci se cumpre: “O novo não acabou de nascer, o velho não acabou de morrer, e nestes monstros claros-escuros surgem”. O pragmatismo do nosso tempo prefere a mentira útil ao valor moral da verdade, manipulando emoções que o público não é capaz de detectar nem tem tempo de valorizar. “Vivemos em um mundo em que a função suprema do signo é fazer desaparecer a realidade e ao mesmo tempo mascarar esse desaparecimento”. Para definir esse tipo de “farsa” utiliza-se o termo pós-verdade, que se apresenta como uma verdade interpretável, que não responde a fatos demonstráveis e como mais um produto de consumo, uma verdade aparente ao gosto do homem pós-moderno. Na era da pós-verdade, as escolas devem ajudar os alunos a discernir as informações que recebem da mídia e aprender a procurar evidências da verdade. Esses tipos de habilidades de avaliação são agora mais necessários do que nunca, devido ao grande acesso à mídia digital disponível para os alunos. Se as crianças são o futuro, o futuro pode ser muito mal informado, mas podemos fazer alguma coisa?

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE (FONTE: DECS):** Verdade; pós-verdade; educação; redes sociais; fake News; informação.

## INTRODUCTION

Inventing the truth is not a novel phenomenon; however, in the contemporary context, it may be related to the new world order. Skeptical people who do not believe in objective truth and admit the existence only of *one's own truth* frequently accept numerous lies that are told to them by the media and, especially, their social networks. Many political parties use posttruth as a communication strategy in their electoral campaigns. The Oxford *Dictionary* chooses a word of the year every twelve months, which aims to identify the term that was the object of the most widespread social use during the preceding year. In 2013, the word of the year was *selfie*; in 2014, it was “vaping”; in 2015, it was an *emoji* that focused on smiling with tears; in 2016, it was “posttruth”; in 2017, it was *fake news*; in 2018, it was “toxic”; in 2019, it was “climate emergency”; in 2020, it was “confinement”; and in 2021, it was “vaccine”. In 2022, the word of the year is not yet clear, but relevant debates have focused on “flow”, “metaverse”, or all aspects of “security”.

The notion of posttruth, which is also known as an *emotional lie*, is a neologism that refers to the phenomenon in which the reality of things and, therefore, the truth is subordinated to sentiment with the goals of creating and shaping public opinion as well as influencing social attitudes. Although posttruth, which represents a falsification of the truth, coincides with the traditional *notion of a lie*, it differs from the latter notion in terms of its valuation; namely, lying is viewed as a negative behavior in any society, whereas the notion of posttruth is more indifferent, since it does not matter whether something is true or a lie. This term could represent a novel version

of *public relations*, which Edward Bernays<sup>4</sup>, in the classic text *Propaganda*, described as follows:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this hidden mechanism of society constitute the invisible government that holds the true power that governs the destiny of our country. Those who govern us, shape our

4 Edward Louis Bernays (November 22, 1891 – March 9, 1995) was an Austrian publicist, journalist, and inventor of the notion of propaganda as well as public relations theory. A Jew of Austrian nationality, he was the nephew of Sigmund Freud, from whom he adapted conceptions of the unconscious to the context of the United States with a focus on Self-related persuasion in the field of mass advertising. *Propaganda*, his most famous book, was published in 1928. Bernays was a personal advisor to several presidents of the United States, the White House and the most important national and international companies worldwide with respect to matters pertaining to public relation. As a young man, his parents decided to emigrate to New York, where he decided to use his uncle's ideas to influence public opinion. When he was 25 years old, he proposed to the president of the United States at that time, Woodrow Wilson, that the entrance of the United States into the First World War should be justified by the claim that the United States wanted to “bring democracy to all of Europe”. This slogan was successful. After the Great War, he began to use his knowledge for commercial purposes. In 1920, a cigarette manufacturer was seeking to increase tobacco consumption among women. Bernays consulted a psychoanalyst, who indicated that some women smoked in public as a form of rebellion against machismo. Thus, instead of designing an advertisement, Bernays invented a news story. He paid a dozen girls to smoke in the middle of a large parade on Fifth Avenue and told them to call their cigarettes “torches of freedom.” Journalists were invited to interview these women; the next day, this story was on the front page of all the newspapers, and cigarette consumption began to increase rapidly. Bernays was the creator of what is now known as marketing.

minds, define our tastes or suggest our ideas are largely people we have never heard of. (3)

However, this author never imagined the speed, intensity and vast amounts of information, whether false or true, that can currently be transmitted via social networks. The art of deceiving consists of repeating a lie many times until it becomes a great truth. During the era of Nazism, Goebbels already knew that lying is a revolutionary weapon that can the world, and Orwell imagined this possibility in his work *1984*; *it has been known to* all dictators of all ages. A lie travels across the world without any restraint, and it can serve all kinds of interests; furthermore, when people are deceived, they make decisions that can have negative effects on their lives. Posttruth is thus a pathology of society whose etiology consists of a tolerance to lies that leads to a social immunodeficiency syndrome because the individual cannot—or finds it very difficult to—defend himself or herself from the widespread social implantation of this phenomenon. Posttruth has been defined as a space in which information and hard data are subordinated to emotions, resentment or the beliefs, intuitions, or imagination of each individual.

Informational contexts in which anything goes, in which no concepts of truth or lies are possible, generates mistrust and intellectual anesthesia. The fact that this term contains the word *truth* is also an intellectual trap because, in reality, it represents a lie disguised as postmodernity, in which context any *tweet* is alleged to have the same value as a library filled with research. The contemporary world is characterized by a civilization of doubt, which mistrusts everything, even itself. Tolerance is founded on doubt because a person who doubts tends to be more condescending in terms of

his or her other opinions. Posttruth encourages doubt artificially and silently, but it represents a full-blown attack; in particular, teachers have great responsibility in this context. Their responsibility is not to isolate their students but rather to provide them with the necessary tools that can enable them to evaluate the information they receive and offer them a foundation on which they can develop different positions and arguments and thus come to know the truth.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The use of new technologies has raised issues with respect to the truth, as evidenced by political campaigns, especially those of Donald Trump and Brexit, in which context beliefs, feelings and personal interests have prevailed over the truth. Hence, posttruth is known as *an emotional lie*. Although the development of posttruth theory can be attributed to several historical causes, it is obvious that new technologies have contributed to this phenomenon by shaping scientific knowledge and dominating the thinking of internet consumers.

Researchers at Stanford University presented high school students with a photograph of strange-looking flowers that was posted on the image site Imgur by a user named PleasegoogleShakerAamerpleasegoogle; this picture was titled “Nuclear Flowers of Fukushima”, and it indicated that some flowers could resemble a birth defect as a consequence of nuclear attacks (4). This photograph was not attributed to any author, nor did it indicate the geographical location of the flowers. The researchers asked the students whether the image provided evidence of the aberrations caused by the nuclear disaster. The results indicated that more than 80% of the students did not inquire into the source of the photograph or

verify the information but rather accepted the image as a fact. These students could not distinguish between real and fake news sources on Facebook. These researchers reported that these students found it difficult to differentiate between ads and articles, between neutral and biased sources, and between fake and real accounts (5).

These examples reveal the extent to which emotions prevail over real events, a phenomenon which has serious repercussions on the formation and maturation of people. At present, approximately 4.540 million people access the internet daily, accounting for 59% of the global population. If information configures the mind, it also configures the ways in which we reason and think. However, it would be unfair to attribute all relevant problems to the network, and some scholars have already claimed that this negative consequence can be solved by reprogramming relevant algorithms to ensure that the information they present is in line with the truth or that individuals who transmit falsehoods or half-truths are punished. According to the American writer Ralph Keyes, in his book *The post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*, this era of *posttruthfulness* represents a twilight zone in ethical terms, due to people's lack of trust (6) in institutions and the ability of lies to be spread via social networks with impunity. The loss of credibility has rendered the truth invisible, thus leading to a deep identity crisis. New technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Google, are not simple platforms; rather, they are committed to managing a silent majority through algorithms that can influence or contaminate users on the basis of preferences and page visits—including those of their contacts—thereby shaping and distorting the ways in which we view the world. Relevant platforms have been referenced jointly by the acronym GAFa (i.e., Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple).

## WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THIS PROCESS?

This process begins with the generation of an “information bubble”—a so-called *filter bubble*—that actually coincides with the image that the user has of the situation at hand with the goal of leading the user to believe that everyone thinks in the same manner as the use him- or herself and that no discussions are in order; the theory has been supported on this basis. When a fact begins to resemble the user's own thoughts, it is very difficult to tell the difference between what is true and what is not. On the other hand, when these information bubbles emerge, the problem of informational isolation is aggravated, and consequently, rigorous content has less impact than does material drawn from people's emotions and beliefs. Large companies work tirelessly to personalize algorithms and make them more user friendly, thus leading internet users to neglect other opinions. In this way, these companies direct users to information that is in line with what they already believe is most interesting and relevant to them. Google is aware of users' interests on the basis of their previous searches, *likes* or “I like” statements. According to Eric Schmidt<sup>5</sup>, “It will be very difficult for people to look at or consume something that to some extent has not been tailored for them” (7).

Notably, on many occasions, a news item that exhibits a professional or academic appearance in a study section,

5 E. Schmidt (born April 27, 1955) is an American entrepreneur and computer scientist who served as CEO of Google from 2001 to 2011. Schmidt's family is passionate with respect to environmental sustainability and has donated to several projects pertaining to renewable energy and climate change. Schmidt has also toured some of the world's most controlled regimes, including Cuba and North Korea, with the aim of promoting open access to the internet.

which may be introduced by the term “about”, may convince students that the site in question is neutral and authoritative. Therefore, such students tend to believe that the information contained on such a site should be accepted without evidence or supporting citations. They also do not distinguish ads from sponsored content and articles. These investigations have also revealed that the majority of college students do not suspect to encounter bias in *tweets*. For example, students were sent a link to a *tweet* by MoveOn<sup>6</sup> concerning the sentiments of gun owners that cited a poll by Public Policy Polling<sup>7</sup>. Most of these students did not detect potential biases in this *tweet* by an activist group, thus indicating that they were not able to distinguish a main source from a marginal source.

In this context, emotions play a leading role by replacing real facts and, therefore, causing the truth of things to be neglected. In a world in which people leave digital traces every day and hour, the person who analyzes the data most effectively is also able to produce the most accurate diagnosis of emotions. In the posttruth age, it is more important to feel than to think, and the characteristic that differentiates this age from other is not

6 This organization is a progressive public policy advocacy group and political action committee that was formed in 1998 in response to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton by the U.S. House of Representatives. MoveOn.org has raised millions of dollars for liberal candidates in the United States. It also operates a petition website that is similar to Change.org.

7 Public Policy Polling is a polling company that is influential in the American Democratic Party; it was founded in 2001 by businessman Dean Debnam, who is the current president and CEO of the company. In addition to political issues, the company has surveyed the public concerning a variety of topics. The surveys used by the company are based on an automated questionnaire, which represents an unscientific undertaking in the eyes of many researchers.

lies but rather polarization. The student is permanently subjected to the tyranny of algorithms, as he or she constantly leaves traces that provide more data and tends to interact with related users. In light of the facts that algorithms are *hackable*, that they are not neutral and that, in fact, we do not know their nature with certainty, one consequence of this digital migration proposed by the tyrant is immediate: on each occasion when the user becomes less exposed to opposing opinions, he or she is able to fabricate what is true for himself or herself. Sam Wineburg, a professor of history and American studies at Stanford University, studied “civic reasoning online.” On one occasion, he presented his students with two posts that announced Donald Trump’s candidacy for president: one was from a real Fox News account and featured a blue check mark to indicate that it had been verified, while the other was from an account that looked similar to the account of Fox News (8). Only one-quarter of his students recognized and explained the importance of the blue check mark, and an even more notable point was that more than 30% of the students claimed that the fake account was more reliable (9).

Another issue that should be considered in this context pertains to the trivialization that occurs when all information is attributed an equal rank, which can lead to great confusion due to the complexity of the task of distinguishing what is true from what is false; this situation ultimately leads to posttruth. In a study conducted by Wineburg, high school and college students were revealed to be influenced by high-quality design, drawings, graphics or writing, which could condition them to believe various claims without verifying the corresponding content. They simply take for granted what is attractive to them. This author reported that adults must pay attention to this question because individuals

believe that their skill in using social networks entails that they know how to identify the truth, whereas they must actually learn to evaluate the credibility of such information. The students in this context assumed that Google classified the results, and it was necessary to inform them of the falsity of this claim.

“The veracity of information was tasks that used to be the responsibility of editors, librarians and now fall on the shoulders of anyone who uses a screen to find out about the world,” as Wineburg related to NPR<sup>8</sup> (10). The solution to this problem is not to remove this responsibility from students but rather to teach them to seek accurate information in a democratic context.

The origin of such trivialization is immediacy, which is defined as the ability to obtain immediate information—regarding both past and present events—that can encourage people to acquire knowledge without reflection because everything is at hand. This lack of reflection leads to superficiality because the information received in this context is not deepened; the result of this process is that the truth becomes volatilized and lacks consistency, which is conducive to posttruth. A study conducted by researchers at Stanford University (11), in which 7800 responses were collected, asked high school and college students in twelve states to evaluate the information presented in *tweets*. These researchers were discouraged because the students formulated answers in which they were misled repeatedly because they did not seek or perform data analysis but instead relied solely on a *reasonable list* obtained from neutral

sources to answer the question and did not consider the veracity of the information.

On the other hand, the overinformation provided by social networks, which entails an excess of news and sources concerning any subject, is very difficult to process and increases the complexity of the task of determining which information is relevant and which information does not respond to the truth. This torrent of data makes it difficult for individuals to prioritize, decide on what is important and concentrate, thus facilitating the dispersion of the mind and preventing any objective analysis of the material under consideration. In many cases, this situation involves no separations among the recording, reading and analysis of content, which does not pass through the hands of experts or critics, which would have promoted greater scientific rigor before the digital age.

This excessive information can intoxicate students since it has direct effects on three aspects: attention, time and knowledge. Attention refers to the ability to apply one’s understanding voluntarily to a given objective, that is, to take that objective into account or into consideration and to decide what is more relevant; attention thus acts as a filter via the individual’s psychic concentration on the objective at hand, which the subject then processes in his or her consciousness. Therefore, attention is closely related to interest and context. On the other hand, attention is a key factor with respect to knowledge. In the contemporary world, the key to education is not access to information but rather the attention that is devoted to such information; namely, without such attention, no reminders of the information one has received are available. In situations involving overinformation, attention is canceled, and a breakdown in knowledge

8 National Public Radio is an American nonprofit media organization that produces programming for a national network that consists of more than one-thousand public radio stations in that country. NPR produces and broadcasts news and cultural programming.

occurs; Fernando de la Rosa refers to this situation as the “economy of attention” (12).

The second aspect pertains to people’s perceptions of time, such that which everything appears to happen faster than is actually the case. When a student receives overinformation, that students feel compelled to engage in activity and to feel connected, namely, “In case something happens and I miss it”. This situation represents a form of placebo that can deceive the student in question because the real speed of events is characterized by another rhythm that can help the student improve him- or herself; in our opinion, this realization represents one of the secrets of success. Not everything is *for the sake of yesterday*. Things and people have their own times, and knowing how to wait can allow individuals to avoid frustration or dissatisfaction and is one component of happiness.

The third relevant aspect in this context, i.e., knowledge, represents a slippery slope, because if there is insufficient attention or time is available for the contents in question to mature, it is impossible to acquire and retain such concepts, thereby ultimately allowing students to learn. Students have to know that information is not the same thing as knowledge and that not all information can be transformed into knowledge; namely, to obtain knowledge, one must memorize material and ask questions—that is, essentially, one must work. Excessive information leads to indoctrination, which results in the truth becoming hidden or lost; in particular, the truth thus becomes irrelevant, which is an essential component of posttruth.

The characteristics of posttruth, as is widely known, include the fact that *fake news* or false news is transmitted via social networks and, surprisingly, that such false news

is shared at the same rate as is true news. The effect of this situation is to generate emotions, whether favorable or unfavorable, that are more intense and important than the content that is being transmitted. This situation is attributed to the fact that social networks have enabled fake accounts that nevertheless seem to be authentic to proliferate; these accounts are ultimately misleading and help spread lies.

Consequently, the truth is replaced by emotion and feeling because what matters in this context is the result; that is, this situation is characterized by utilitarianism, which represents another characteristic of posttruth. On the other hand, as news is valued on the basis of the number of clicks, *likes* and forwards that it receives, the publication of content that attracts attention is favored, even if, in many cases, such content is irrelevant, morbid or simply funny—namely, content that is known as infotainment or soft news—thereby enhancing users’ desire for recognition and self-affirmation beyond the level of reality, which is, in turn, replaced by the ego. If posttruth is related to sentiment, it is not by chance, and it seems to be logical that users want to know how they are perceived on social networks. Therefore, relevant individuals succumb to the temptation to share inconsequential content with the goal of receiving virality, acceptance, visits and, in many cases, money. The relationship between this phenomenon and the notion of posttruth is also very obvious in light of the secondary role to which the truth is relegated as a result of the dictatorship of the click.

#### EXISTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF POSTTRUTH

Given the close relationship between social networks and the spread of posttruth, a question arises concern-

ing whether this phenomenon has any repercussions on people in terms of the ways in which they think and act. If the entire phenomenon of posttruth is based on the claim that an opinion is worth more than real facts and a focus on “how I feel”, then we face an intrinsically narcissistic current that is empowered by the ability of everyone to publish their opinions in the same way. If a person manages to attain priority on social networks, he or she automatically becomes a kind of celebrity who can indicate where the truth lies. In the absence of objective and universal standards, all claims are equal: philanthropy and cannibalism; science and magic; your virtue and my vice. In the words of Mario Bunge, “Denying science is much easier than learning it”<sup>9</sup>.

Since everything is relative, anything goes, which is why relativism represents the first consequence of posttruth. The roots of this consequence include individualism; nonconformity; the undervaluation of the study of disciplines that invite reflection, such as philosophy and the humanities; and Marxism, which features four coordinates, i.e., atheism, materialism, dialectics and socialism. The application of the dialectic to posttruth society entails that the more an idea is repeated, the more truth becomes a sign of quality. Each idea must engender its opposite, thus leading to the famous idea of the class struggle. “In this fight of both—identification or merger—, a superior social form would emerge, which in turn would be denied by its opposite... It is the famous idealistic question of the thesis, antithesis

and synthesis, which is the thesis for a new antithesis, and so on” (13). Furthermore, the fact that, according to Engels’ materialist perspective, society is divided into classes on the basis of what each class produces, the means by which it does so, and the ways in which what is thus produced is exchanged. These postulates are based on the economy, and a purely material perspective discards all transcendent, philosophical, legal or political principles. The conceptualization of this Marxist idea is important because affirming the truth of posttruth can lead us to discover a will to power. This thoughtless society that Marxism tries to impose makes it easier for individuals to live in a world that lacks history but that is full of images and sounds, in which context knowledge, logic and reflection are not needed, because what matters is that ignorance prevails; thus, people are not free.

In our opinion, a new language is introduced in this context. This language allows an emoticon to represent a feeling, a thought or a state without requiring the individual to elaborate the phrase or text through which it is expressed. Consequently, such an individual does not think or write, and he or she loses his or her capabilities pertaining to spelling and expression; thus, sign language is increasingly replacing the essence of the person. In addition, the receiver interprets the emoticon in terms of its truth; furthermore, this process must be as fast as possible because reality exists only in the human mind. This historical mutant proclaimed by Marxism results in a form of relativism that does not need to be rooted in any idea; rather, it limits itself to uttering one speech act after another because anything goes. The basis for this claim would be the economy and the engine of history, dialectics and class struggle. After all, cognitive relativism attributes validity to different views of the world, and it

9 The Argentine physicist and mathematician Mario Bunge (West Florida, September 21, 1919 – Montreal, Canada, February 24, 2020), who won the Prince of Asturias Award for Humanities (1982), is viewed as one of the most important philosophers and scientists of the contemporary world, according to The Science Hall of Fame.

accepts that these views are interpreted in a particular way and that *the truth* of a given person depends on the surrounding context. Relativism is suicidal because it inhibits the search for truth and deceives even through its own definition; namely, if there are no objective truths, would a teacher be a teaching craftsman? Alternatively, would a teacher be simply a moderator?

### CONSEQUENCES FOR THE PERSON AND SOCIETY

In our view, this situation has five important consequences for the person and, therefore, for society.

#### **Disorientation**

We can define disorientation as a state of mind that is characterized by confusion regarding time, space or who one is. It also refers to a situation in which the subject is unable to identify people and unable to define himself or herself, which is related to the difficulties encountered in the learning process. When a person considers the truth to be irrelevant, he or she goes astray and does not know what the meaning of his or her life is because he or she cannot answer transcendental questions, such as the following, among others: From where do I come? Why am I in the world? What lies behind death? Does God exist? If the truth is relative, such a person is likely to develop different answers over the course of his or her life; however, these answers ultimately die due to their lack of solid roots. This disorientation resulting from posttruth has serious existential consequences because some human beings have stripped themselves of their humanity and dedicated themselves to the task of deciding what the future must be, namely, a *human* future. Good and bad will lack content, since they depend only on the will itself.

#### **Loss of Identity**

A study conducted at the universities of New York and Stanford revealed that leaving Facebook is related to a more satisfied, happier life and reduced depression. This improvement is equivalent to 25%-40% of the benefits offered by psychological therapy (14). Anyone who lives permanently on social networks, i.e., in a virtual world of posttruth, becomes depersonalized because personal freedom, that is, the ability to be what one is freely, is called into question in this context. It is difficult for such a person to answer the question of “who am I, really?” However, it may be easier for one to explain who one is in the digital world, because one lives in this context. Such an individual knows what others think of him or her via these networks; furthermore, he or she is aware of the fact that expressions made via these networks do not always contain true thoughts but nevertheless maintains that they are what matters most. Such an artificially constructed digital identity ultimately replaces or supersedes the individual’s real identity. When one does not know who one is, one cannot know how one should behave or where one is going. “Man is the only being who has to set himself the task of developing a personality that is not inherent to him by virtue of innate automatisms” (11). When we refer to a person, we do so by virtue of that unique and unrepeatable identify that no one can supplant and that has its own name; otherwise, we will have a humanity without men.

Posttruth exercises a power over future generations that can weaken them and subject them to various manipulators, in which context the individual loses control over him- or herself, thereby dissolving the identity of the person into a notion of sociocultural diversity that is rooted in a conception of the *I* that is based on the

foundation of the *self* (or the image that one wants to convey to others, even if it is false).

C. S. Lewis, in his book *The abolition of man*, claimed that manipulators know how to raise awareness and what kind of awareness to raise. Can we call such a man without a face a member of the human species? The author continued by asking the following question: What does the manipulator offer to the people whom he intends to abolish? The answer is the same as that given by Mephistopheles to Faust: “Surrender your soul, and you will receive power in return” (15). However, the actual event indicates that once the soul and the person have been surrendered, we will become slaves of that to which we have given ourselves, and we will not know who we are because someone else will tell us.

### ***Emotivism and Overstimulation***

This research has revealed that the most successful and frequently shared news is related to emotion. In the absence of a rational guide for assessments of truth, both feelings and emotions become truth. Self-control, which is characterized by intelligence, has no place in the emotional world. On the other hand, the number of stimuli that a person receives, even if they do not want to do so, is sufficiently high as to alter their emotional balance, their ability to think and their freedom. Recent neuroimaging studies have revealed that emotions play a more important role than does the rational part of human beings. In other words, a news item is more likely to be shared if it activates the social part of the brain and if the news item in question has greater social value for the reader. Recent research has shed light on the ability of fake news to engage the parts of the brain that are associated with social acceptance directly.

Lieberman’s laboratory reported that when subjects experienced high levels of activation in the social part of the brain, they were much more likely to spread or share relevant information. “This network changes us from being consumers of information to DJs [sic] of information”, he says (16). This phenomenon is directly related to persuasion, which causes a person to accept the information with which he or she is presented and then to act on that information. A complete neural region focuses on preventing people from accepting ideas or being persuaded by information that could isolate them from their social networks. As a result, the social brain region is not only more susceptible to fake news that exhibits a high level of social value but also defends itself by shouting “fake news!” in response to information that is contrary to information that has already been accepted. “The trolls, the bots and disreputable news sites take that individual reaction and spread it through a group of self-selected users at lightning speed” (17). The consequences of this entire set of emotional elements are obviously pernicious, especially among adolescents, who are ultimately confined to their own egos and thus lack the ability to transcend.

### ***Hedonism***

The notion of existential disorientation, which is derived from that of posttruth and linked to emotionalism, encourages individuals to search for immediate pleasure. Moreover, virtue and pleasure are presented as opposites in this context. This attitude has been highlighted in society via the acronym YOLO (i.e., *you only live once*), and it has been viewed by young people as an invitation to enjoy life in a pleasant sense. This behavior has been referred to as “hedonistic instantaneousism” by Aquilino

Polaino: “It is the logic of the immature and the irresponsible” (18). In this context, the body becomes the center of gravity of the individual’s life, thus leading such an individual to attribute extreme importance to beauty, fitness, diet or sexual matters. Consequently, one must take advantage of life today without considering what will happen in the future because such thinking about the future requires one to consider issues such as death, old age, illness, and commitments that are binding for life, whereas it is better to live the emotional present, thus offering the individual instant gratification, which is typical of the digital world.

### **Digital Polarization**

The term polarization refers to situations in which people’s attention and interest are focused on one thing, i.e., attracting, absorbing, or capturing. The development of technology has led to the polarization of the attention of millions of people in the virtual world. The internet operates via mechanisms that entail that the most striking content rises very high in the *rankings* and can go viral. On some occasions, very radical or false positions are rewarded by the network in terms of the *ranking*. By influencing 2 billion people (19), the internet shapes the history of the world.

The speed with which a message is transmitted allows the news or the message to be distorted because of a lack of time for reflection or for the maturation of its content. A larger problem emerges when content is shared without being rated. Another danger is the normalization of such content, which can allow even a victim to view this content inevitable. Two important factors must be added in this context: anonymity and distance. Javier García-Manglano, a researcher at the

Institute of Culture and Society (ICS) of the University of Navarra, asks whether

[...] The sincerity that we have in the networks shows our authentic self, or it is an altered version due to the lack of relational context in which we all move as social beings and it is a reflection of society, but sometimes it can distort reality one way or another. (20)

García-Manglano indicated that social networks offer us small rewards in the short term but that they ultimately make us less rational; thus, this author proposed to use technology to promote personal growth while avoiding taking advantage of our neural vulnerabilities, which could lead to addiction (21).

One line of research pursued by this author focused on understanding the psychological effects of the use of technologies on people’s personalities. The results indicated that, in the United States, this fact may lead, through the rejection of adult responsibilities or the fear of failure as well as the difficulty of establishing interpersonal relationships, to a greater tendency to develop problems pertaining to anxiety and depression (22). In other words, technology has overtaken our brains.

The design of a social network is based on the economy of behavior (i.e., *behavioral economics*) (23)<sup>10</sup> as well as

10 Behavioral economics incorporates psychology into the process of analyzing the decision-making underlying a given economic outcome, such as the factors that lead a consumer to buy one product over another. The American academic Richard Thaler won the Nobel Prize in Economics for his pioneering work in this field. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences praised Thaler for incorporating psychological assumptions into the process of analyzing economic decision-making.

on the brain's reward mechanism, which causes us to want to repeat such an experience; this phenomenon is thus similar to that of addiction. When we receive small rewards, we allow ourselves to be fooled because hormones related to happiness are released, such as oxytocin or dopamine, which occurs every time that we click on a button labelled *like*, and we can obtain more rewards when we are embedded in a group. Among adolescents, this issue is more worrisome because of the social pressure to which they are subjected as a result of their surroundings, in which context they may stop thinking because they are satisfied with those rewards or with the social acceptance that they have received. This situation can damage their mental health, given that cognitive, emotional and executive processes occur at different speeds and that the maturation of such adolescents can proceed at different rates. This stage of life involves an unstable balance among the head, the heart and the development of abilities. Integrating and regulating these systems requires adequate control strategies (24). One consequence of this process is the ability to shape the identity of people via social networks. In the context of social networks, fragmentation of the personality is easy to achieve since the best version of each particular point can always be presented; in addition, change can be presented in light of the environment in which the subject in question operates with the goal of receiving approval from others. In summary, multiple personalities can be expressed without responding to

what they truly are in any case. These fragments can give rise to identity disorders between the virtual self and the real self because they involve pretending and because the person is not recognized in this context. Logical consequences of this phenomenon include anxiety, depression, sexual disorders and mood swings. An additional problem that emerges in this context pertains to the disinhibition produced by the virtual world; namely, on some occasions when individuals act in the real world, the reaction that occurs is the opposite. In addition, this image must be maintained over time, and others increasingly demand better versions. When the personality of a person becomes distorted, that person undoubtedly suffers depersonalization: namely, he or she ultimately does not know who he or she is or where he or she is going, and he or she thus becomes a character in the great theater of the world. On the other hand, when one's identity is divided, one part can be shown while another cannot, thus causing the intimacy in question to be shared to some degree and dividing the self with the goal of manipulating the person in question. Thus, we conclude that identity is a social problem and, as such, it represents a sociological problem that can be quantified on the basis of relevant data.

Consider the observation of Zygmunt Bauman in his book *The individualized society*, where he claims that "just when the community collapses, identity is invented" (25). According to this author, identity has replaced and supplanted the community. For anthropological reasons, human beings exhibit a need to belong to a community that can serve as a basis to build their identities, which corresponds to a sense of *feeling at home*; on this basis, the following questions can be answered: Who am I? To what group do I belong? Who are my parents and my ancestors? This situation gives the impression that,

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Unlike the field of classical economics, in which context decision-making is based entirely on cold logic, behavioral economics can account for irrational behavior and seeks to understand why such behavior may occur. This concept can be applied at the microlevel to individual situations, or it may focus on the broader actions of a society or trends in financial markets.

in social networks, identity realizes the famous phrase that Marx expressed in the *Communist manifesto*, according to which everything solid vanishes into the air. In social networks, identity is constructed and deconstructed as something cultural, which is associated with absolute freedom of choice. Is that prototype *that of the outsider* who does not identify with any group, but who, at the same time, ascribes to the notion of *do it yourself* and is thus subjected to the dictatorship of the multiple possibilities that are offered in the digital world. The individual struggles between a concrete identity and another anonymous and mutable identity, in which context impersonal social relationships establish an abstract society whose most serious problems, according to sociologists, are the progressive alienation of citizenship, anxiety and anguish in the context of a permanent search for oneself.

This excessive dedication to networks and surfing the *web*, in addition to the aforementioned consequences, usually has two serious effects: a serious loss of time and a tendency to neglect other important areas for any person, such as effective dedication to one's studies or professional work, one's relationships with one's family and friends, and one's relationship with God. In this context, it is particularly important to note that "the family is the place where the person develops the form of interiority that leads us to conceive ourselves as beings endowed with inner depths and creates the feeling of authenticity without imitating others. The child and adolescent need security and a guarantee of permanence in their environment" (26).

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

We can ask ourselves the following questions: What solutions can address this social conflict? Is there any possibility of controlling or mitigating the influence of the digital world, particularly with respect to its ability to promote posttruth?

We address these possible solutions from two perspectives: 1) the field of communications and 2) the field of anthropology, which addresses human beings in depth.

In the context of information, the following recommendations can be made: sanction false news; guarantee real news; allow professionals and serious media to regain or acquire prestige; and promote critical thinking. Accordingly, encouraging young people to study is an obligation of every teacher.

In the field of anthropology, solutions, even more than technical measures, must be personal; these solutions thus involve channeling one's natural inclination toward the truth, through adequate training. This training can be supported by several strategies, such as those suggested below:

- Let go of the daily world and allow students to stand at a distance. This approach can prevent the continuous activity that leaves students with insufficient time for reflection.
- Encourage admiration. Namely, anyone who engages in admiration is open to knowledge. The ethics of wonder enables an individual who relies on this approach to discover what truly exists.
- Avoid prejudices. Namely, people who exhibit prejudices are victims of cognitive biases, which are thus translated into topics that are repeated everywhere.

- Attain some degree of independence in terms of one's own judgments and reflections. This approach enables one to distance oneself from common interpretations, from public or published opinions, or from the "terror" that the media can occasionally elicit. However, inner freedom is even more important than outer freedom. The former refers to an unconditional desire for the truth and a lack of willingness to allow oneself to be drowsy or manipulated by anything.
- Acquire intellectual humility. Namely, no person knows everything, and wisdom is possessed by those who love the truth, those who yearn to understand the final whys of the world, and those who strive to observe relationships; these figures are characterized by their wise use of knowledge and their good sense.
- Encourage reflection and introspection. Namely, one of the clearest causes of the predominance of posttruth is the superficiality resulting from a lack of reflection. The antidote to this issue is precisely the effort to promote thought that can penetrate reality and access the truth.
- Bring human beings closer to nature. Saint Ambrose indicated that nature is the best teacher of truth. In our opinion, contact with nature and openness to creation, which are currently rare for people who are immersed in the virtual world, are conducive to reflection and a form of thought that is rooted in reality because they can connect us with the essence of being human. "It is forgotten that man does not create himself. It is spirit and will, but also nature" (27). True wisdom, which, as Pope Francis indicated, is a product of reflection cannot be achieved through the accumulation of a vast amount of data that ultimately leads to saturation and clouding, i.e., a kind of mental contamination. The artificial emotions generated by the use of new technologies can prevent or hinder interpersonal relationships, thus giving rise to serious dissatisfaction among human beings, who are called to a vocation of love.
- Promote a sense of responsibility or digital citizenship. Good training—i.e., so-called digital citizenship—could start from the moment when the user accesses such media, that is, from childhood. This process could aim to encourage people to adopt a mentality that prevents them from collaborating in the process of posttruth, such as by spreading falsehoods as a result of levity, ignorance or ill will. The way in which free and responsible citizens can be developed with respect to the use of digital technologies inevitable involves adequate education. "The concept of 'digital literacy' cannot remain at the level of a simple instruction in terms of technical skills. Rather, it must simultaneously be directed toward a conscious and productive use of the vast possibilities that the network has" (28).
- Fully develop people's personalities. The integral development of a personality, which includes the subordination of emotions to intelligence and the will, without the aim of repressing one's feelings but rather an emphasis on channeling them, would be the antidote to the emotionalism and hedonism that characterize the "posttruth era".
- Recover the value of the truth and explain to students that it is possible to know the truth, thereby inviting them to call things by their name; in this manner, what is expressed is derived from reality, rather than the reverse. Only in this way is it possible to transform the influence of posttruth and overcome this challenge. The value of truth perfects human

beings, whereas relativism fragments them even in their most intimate being.

- Pay attention to the spirituality of young people. If human beings expel God, other gods will take his place because the desire for happiness is inscribed in the hearts of human beings.

## CONCLUSION

The absence of a purpose for human beings in the world leads to the loss of the meaning of life, of the reason for which one is for in the world, thus resulting, in the words of Weber, “specialists without a soul, livelihoods of the heart” (29). If the truth perfects man, it is necessary to demonstrate the splendor of the truth because we are not the ones who possess this truth; rather, it is the truth that possesses us.

Faith is never an impediment to knowledge, because there is no contradiction between reason and faith, between science and faith, because the search for truth always goes towards the knowledge of the fullness of reality. Whoever seeks the truth does not claim assurances. Quite the contrary: it tries to make vulnerable what it already knows and always wants to know more. And, paradoxically, it is this openness to risk that makes the person somewhat invulnerable, because their small interests are no longer at stake, but the obvious reality. (30)

Cardinal Robert Sarah claimed that some of the characteristics that are suffocating the West include “the acedia and the dynamism of acting” (31), which refer to a process of cooling and spiritual laxity to which the

Gospel refers as lukewarmness, which is neither cold nor hot and causes human beings to prefer anything to God. The Christian is an expert in humanity to the extent that God has made him or her the depositary of the truth and responsible for its good management. “If man acts like this, not only will he become good in himself and before God, but the good that comes from God will become a power in him” (32). When a human being is in opposition to the truth, he or she is in opposition to God, and opposition to God is always self-destructive—not because God destroys man but rather because sin destroys (33). The philosopher Han BC made the following claim: “The modern loss of beliefs, which affects not only God or the hereafter, but also reality itself, makes human life become something totally ephemeral. [...] Nothing is constant or lasting” (34). In this era of contradictions, dead ends, hopelessness and the abolition of truth, the thirst for infinity that human beings exhibit takes an absolute an absolute form. To develop a solution to the crisis of truth, it would be sufficient to establish God as a foundation, including all the possible consequences of this action; namely, if we suppress the supernatural, what remains is the unnatural.

“The truth gathers men, while the lie disperses them and pits them against each other” (35).

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