ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the concept of post-truth related to the circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in the formation of public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs, and the subsequent projection of this phenomenon in social media, as various studies have demonstrated that some fake news stories generate more engagement from users than vetted reporting from reliable news sources. This will start from a general introduction and an associated theoretical reflection, and then focus on the case of Venezuela and its recent historical circumstances in order to analyze how fake news circulates in this country stimulated by a context of widespread disinformation.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2016, the Republican Donald Trump and the Democrat Hillary Clinton ran against each other in the US presidential elections. Against all odds and the polls, Trump received 304 electoral votes and Clinton, 227, with a participation of 55.4 per cent (State Elections Offices, 2016). The analysts all noted that Trump had won a majority thanks to a combination of rural and white working-class voters, who all rubberstamped his discourse, thus thwarting the campaign strategies of the Democrats. Broadly speaking, the constituents proved themselves to be weary of the establishment, with which they identified Clinton.

It was difficult to predict that some of the promises made by Trump during his presidential campaign would prove to be so profitable for him and win him the presidency. He had pledged to bring about an immediate revolution with the aim of “making America great again”: to reform the tax code and to deport illegal immigrants, starting with the undocumented migrants with a criminal record proliferating from coast to coast; and to commence work on a robust, lofty wall along the border with Mexico: “We
will build a great wall along the southern border — and Mexico will pay for the Wall (...) They don’t know it yet, but they’re gonna pay for the wall”, Trump said during the campaign (Mccaskill, 2016).

He also noted that in his first one hundred days as president, “the immigration ban on Muslims would be in place” (Healy, 2016). Likewise, he vowed to repeal the former president Barack Obama’s health program, known as ‘Obamacare’, on different occasions and even on his own Twitter account on February 10, 2016: “We will immediately repeal and replace ObamaCare - and nobody can do that like me. We will save $’s and have much better healthcare!”. Post-truth based on allegations that ceased to be grounded in objective facts, appealing instead to emotions, beliefs or desires, in this case, those of the electorate, was a hugely successful strategy, for Trump is currently occupying the White House.

On June 23, 2016, several months after Trump’s election victory, the British had the opportunity to vote in referendum on the United Kingdom’s permanence in the European Union: Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union? the possible answers were two: Remain a member of the European Union / Leave the European Union. After a dramatic vote count, according to official data of The Electoral Commission (2016), with 51.9% (remain 16,141,241 - leave 17,410,742), and turnout of 72.2%, they decided that they were better off on their own (although the debate continues). Those voting to leave the European Union had come to believe that, among other issues, the United Kingdom would save millions of pounds a week, money that could then be spent on the health service; that the arrival of immigrants in the country would be checked; and that trade and tariff arrangements would remain unaffected. Together with Trump’s election victory, the Brexit phenomenon managed to make something that was apparently true more important than the truth itself. Also at the end of 2016, the term “post-truth” was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries “Word of the Year” (Oxford University Press, 2016). In the selection process, the editors took into account that the searches using a combination of both terms (post/truth) had increased notably:

Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

‘in this era of post-truth politics, it’s easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire’

‘some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age’.

This had swift repercussions, for in 2017 the term “posverdad” was included as a neologism in the Diccionario de la Lengua de Real Academia Española, which defines it in the following terms: “The deliberate distortion of a reality, which manipulates beliefs and emotions for the purpose of influencing public opinion and social attitudes.”

The media had placed the concept of post-truth, linked to circumstances in which objective facts have less influence on public opinion formation than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs, squarely on the table. Similarly, they fostered the debate on the new technology and Internet access boom, plus the growing popularity of social media, all of which has led to the proliferation of fake news.

In order to analyze such an important issue in current communication, this chapter will focus on Venezuela, a country in which the confluence of different factors has facilitated the alarming proliferation of post-truths and fake news. What are the contextual aspects that have determined this circulation of fake news in the country? How have Venezuela’s political and historical circumstances conditioned its production both before and at present?