

Audiovisual fact-checking in the post-truth era: What does it mean to validate an image?

Fact-checking audiovisual en la era de la posverdad. ¿Qué significa validar una imagen?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This paper aims to explore the broad theoretical debate on the relationships that are established between images and the complexity of applying concepts of truth to them. A look at contemporary Fact-Checking agencies shows that hoaxes and fake news more frequently use audiovisual materials to support their messages. **Methodology:** A review of the theoretical corpus on the relationships between image and validation/truth is made, exemplifying the limits of the dominant ideas with case analyses based on textual analysis. **Results:** The limits of the relationship between truth and audiovisual text were first enunciated in the phenomenological debates on realism, and subsequently nuanced -among others- by the semiotic schools, cultural studies, and the current emergence of "post-digital" theories. Within the framework of such theories, tension has been generated from the marks of veridiction (pixelation, low formats, visual noise, glitch) and the disaffection of the citizenry with the images distributed by the official media. **Conclusions:** In a world where conventional media have less and less capacity to distribute images and influence their interpretations, it is necessary to rethink that the validation of images is a fundamental competence in the creation of the citizenry of the future. Hence, the introduction of critical audiovisual reading skills at compulsory education levels is the only way to challenge the very "referential" nature of images.

KEYWORDS: Image; Post-truth; Representation; Semiotics; Disinformation; Textual analysis; *Fact-checking*.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Este artículo pretende explorar el amplio debate teórico sobre las relaciones que se establecen entre las imágenes y la complejidad de aplicar sobre ellas conceptos de *verdad*. Un vistazo a las agencias de *Fact Checking* contemporáneas demuestra que los bulos y las fake news usan con más frecuencia materiales audiovisuales para respaldar sus mensajes. **Metodología:** Se realiza una revisión del corpus teórico sobre las relaciones entre *imagen* y *validación/verdad*, ejemplificando los límites de las ideas dominantes con análisis de casos basados en el análisis textual. **Resultados:** Los límites de las relaciones entre verdad y texto audiovisual fueron enunciados por primera vez al hilo de los debates fenomenológicos sobre el realismo, y posteriormente matizados –entre otras– por las escuelas semiótica, los estudios culturales y la actual eclosión de las teorías “postdigitales”. En el marco de dichas teorías se ha generado una tensión a partir de las marcas de veredicción (pixelado, bajos formatos, ruido visual, *glitch*) y la desafección de la ciudadanía con las imágenes distribuidas por los medios de comunicación oficiales. **Conclusiones:** En un mundo en el que los medios convencionales cada vez tienen menos capacidad para distribuir imágenes e influir en sus interpretaciones, es necesario replantearse que la validación de las imágenes es una competencia fundamental en la creación de la ciudadanía del futuro. De ahí que la introducción de competencias críticas de lectura audiovisual en los niveles educativos de la enseñanza obligatoria sea la única manera de poner en crisis la propia naturaleza “referencial” de las imágenes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Imagen; Posverdad; Representación; Semiótica; Desinformación; Análisis textual; *Fact-checking*.

CONTENT

1. Introduction. 2. Objectives. 3. Methodology. 4. Discussion. 4.1. Of the truth of the audiovisual text and its (hypothetical) verification. 4.2. In favor of the possibility of the position. Apology of the audiovisual fact-checker. 5. Final reflections. 5.1. Images in the post-truth era. 5.2. Media education: a political, social, educational, and cultural emergency. 6. References.

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

The relationship between *truth* and *image* is, without a doubt, one of the great theoretical problems that can be tackled from the fields of audiovisual study, and very specifically, from disciplines strictly linked to the formal and thematic analysis of audiovisual content. Although, as we will see, in the 1950s the question began to take shape from a strictly phenomenological dimension that, later, would have to go through different semiotic, Marxist, and poststructuralist reformulations, today we are faced with a panorama that, without being strictly new, is undoubtedly more *urgent* for us. With the emergence of the so-called *post-truth* (Rodríguez, 2018; Zunzunegui and Zumalde, 2019), the appeal to a certain irrationality of the audience and the belief in explicitly affective elements over and above their rational disquisition has dramatically accelerated propaganda and manipulative uses of audiovisual content. Spurred on by algorithms that explicitly seek the polarization of content on social networks (Lanier, 2020) –and by the media that, as the recent Covid-19 crisis has shown (López-Rico, González-Esteban, and Hernández-Martínez, 2020), actively participate in the same strategy–, the need to rethink the flows of content creation and dissemination in our field has

acquired a new urgency. In this sense, it should be noted that the context of the Coronavirus pandemic has allowed us to verify quite clearly that disinformation can be considered as a characteristic of the political-institutional discourse, and also from the political forces of the opposition, with important differences among them— which, moreover, has a direct impact on the activity of *prosumer* citizens in the creation and expansion of hoaxes about the pandemic (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco Molpeceres, 2020: 108-109).

As a quick look at many of the verification agencies (*Newtral*, *EFE Verifica*, or *Maldita.es*) shows, the critical analysis exercise is usually carried out using a verification methodology that explicitly refers to the tradition of logic and the so-called “apophantic judgments” (Aristotle, 1982), that is, to the verification of those statements that can exclusively have a *truth value* –understood here in its clearly positivist dimension–. Said more clearly: in the field of written journalism or the statements of policymakers, *validation* can consist –and it goes without saying, it is not usually easy– in the application of a contrast methodology between the statement that says something of what happens in reality and the series of indicators, more or less quantifiable, offered by the factual experience of said event. Now, a hasty look at the concrete and daily exercise of these agencies shows, without the slightest kind of doubt, that the collation of data can no longer ignore the more or less elaborate analysis of audiovisual materials.

Let's take a simple example that definitely clarifies this initial idea. If we take as a reference the article [37 hoaxes and myths about vaccines that they are trying to sell us](#) published by *Maldita.es* in its science section on February 5th, 2021, we can propose some interesting starting insights. In the first place, it is a constantly updated thread that aims to clarify the effects of the vaccine against conspiracy theories and the self-styled “revisionist groups” that, always relying on post-truth techniques –the death of recently vaccinated children, strange hidden organizations that seek to control the population–, reinvent or manipulate scientific information. The first thing that stands out to us is that more than half of the hoaxes have taken the form of *images*: shared *memes*, alleged photos of political leaders making statements, decontextualized photomontages of other humanitarian catastrophes attributed to the vaccine, etc. It is also interesting that the visual spectrum of malicious content is so wide that it covers from what we could call, recalling Barthes (1989), a “zero degree of scientific writing” embodied in those supposed “graphs” that explicitly compare the correlation between the flu vaccine and the risk of infection by the coronavirus, up to the pure fantasy invention of obituaries of alleged victims of the vaccination process.



Image 1: False obituary of a nurse who died from having injected the Pfizer vaccine.
Source: Maldita.es



Image 2: Hoaxes about the risk of the continued use of masks in children.
Source: Maldita.es

Likewise, a feature that also seems relevant to us is that on not a few occasions reference is made to images distributed by both local media –the public radio-television of Marbella– and international media –the 7 News network in Australia–, to cannibalize the prestige and the processes of collation and verification of "professional" media. Thus, manipulation involves appropriating, as an "authority argument", those communication channels that, on other occasions, are branded as "disinformative" or "in denial".



Image 3: Hoax from the local radio station in Marbella.
Source: Twitter



Image 4: Screenshot of the tweet from the Australian TV channel.
Source: Twitter

The current debate on fact-checking places in the foreground the demand for quality journalism, where “data verification” constitutes one of the main competencies of journalism professionals, in a context in which traditional media, mired in a very deep transformation, in the new digital scenario – in which social networks are hegemonic and information companies are trying to optimize their resources to the maximum– have lost value, relevance, and even some legitimacy in our society (Ufarte-Ruiz, Peralta-García, and Murcia-Verdú, 2018). In this sense, the enormous effort made by news companies and agencies specialized in fact-checking should be highlighted, an activity already consolidated in European and North American journalism, especially to deal with the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation (Vázquez-Herrero, Vizoso, and López-García, 2019). Undoubtedly, verification processes contain considerable complexity and the work of multidisciplinary teams that direct their attention, in a very special way, to the circulation of political statements and information that circulate through social networks (Ufarte-Ruiz, Anzera, and Murcia-Verdú, 2020).

On the other hand, as different studies have shown, the phenomenon of fake news –whose phenomenological complexity cannot be ignored, encompassing broad typologies such as "infoadvertising", "propaganda", "satirical news", "fabrication of news", etc. (Romero-Rodríguez, Valle Razo, and Torres Toukoumidis, 2018)– must be framed in a context of the expansion of the logic of entertainment that has generated a constellation of hybrid formats (Han, 2018) – infotainment", "advertainment", "politainment", “edutainment”, etc.–, announced decades ago by Guy Debord within the framework of the new entertainment society (1999). Thus, it should not surprise us that the spread of false news occurs among social groups of low educational and cultural levels, among those who tend to magical and esoteric thinking, and distrust scientific knowledge (Castillo-Riquelme, Hermosilla-Urrea, Poblete -Tiznado, and Durán-Anabalón, 2021).

In short, the propagation of the aforementioned images clearly shows our starting point: fact-checking cannot be carried out without a series of competencies in critical reading of images that go beyond the simple verdictive verification of written statements –traditionalist and positivist conception of the *truth*–, but must take into account those *thematic* and *formal* elements that are

specific to both photography and audiovisual discourse. Let us see, therefore, how we can contribute from our discipline to the debate on its processes and its work systems.

2. Objectives

In a large part of the field bibliography, besides the linguistic contents (Mottola, 2020), emphasis is placed on the relevance that infographics or strictly visual elements play when combating different misinformations (Pedriza, 2017), which necessarily leads us to the issue that the reflection on the “significant” capacities of the image (Zunzunegui, 1995), must be studied both from *reception* and *creation*. Indeed, following the basic ideas outlined by Català Domènech (2019), it is incomprehensible that the new generations of audiovisual creators separate *theory* and *praxis* in watertight compartments, precisely our time being a critical historical moment to recover *thought* in, and about, the creation of audiovisual content. Our main objective in the following pages, therefore, will be to make a synthesis of the most relevant theoretical tremors in the clashes established between the *image* and the *truth*, updating as far as possible the steps already outlined in the context of contemporary critical activity.

Obviously, it is not about making a bibliographic review of the issue here –a field in which, moreover, we already have more than notable precedents (Quintana, 2003; Zumalde and Zunzunegui, 2015)–, but about proposing a necessarily impressionist approximation to those nuclei that we consider most relevant in the contemporary situation of the theories of the image to explore their direct relationship with the problems that good practice of fact-checking supposes. Obviously, our method opts for the essay approach because we consider that in a text that clearly puts the issue of truth in the foreground admits –as has happened in the specific field bibliography– the possibility of proceeding not so much through hermetic conceptual judgments, but rather, through intuition, critical reflection, and open reference to other thinkers.

To systematize our purpose, we propose the following specific objectives:

- O1: Briefly survey the classic discussion between the relationships between *image* and *truth* in the context of news verification.
- O2: Make use of the different contemporary labels for the classification and critical reflection of images (from strictly iconoclastic theories to the increasingly frequent apology of “poor images”) to later try to understand where disinformative images are framed, but above all, what are its veridiction marks (and in what complex situation we find ourselves. The term “veridiction” is applied, used by Greimas (1990), which would be equivalent to the expression “reliable” or “action and effect of establishing something with certainty”, and that could be assimilated to the concept of “truthfulness”).
- O3: Finally, reflect on the challenges that the educational system must face in training fact-checkers and educators with advanced image analysis skills.

3. Methodology

In light of the above, it can be seen that our approach starts from a critical discourse analysis methodology, in which it is proposed a first phase of critical reflection and synthesis on the theoretical basis on which the audiovisual fact-checking process is based, a second phase of bibliographic and conceptual updating, and lastly, a third proactive phase clearly linked to the updating of academic and professional profiles in the field of edu-communication. It is necessary to clarify, therefore, that our main objective is the theoretical and epistemological clarification of the problem, and not so much the creation of a new work methodology. Indeed, throughout the article, we will refer to different guidelines, structures, and ways of approaching the relationships between

truth and image, and in them, the interested reader will be able to find the approach of all kinds of hermeneutical and verdictive methodologies.

As has already been suggested in the introductory section, our work approach is directly heir to the structural and critical semiotic studies about mass media (González Requena, 1988; Zunzunegui, 2005), especially regarding the audio-visual image. Although indeed, the foundations of this field were mainly settled in the area of film studies (Aumont and Marie, 1990; Casetti, 1996), a recent list of works continues to demonstrate its effectiveness in contemporary fields such as the analysis of populisms (Palao Errando, 2016), serial fiction (Iturralde, 2021), or videogames (Martín-Núñez and Navarro Remesal, 2021). From our point of view, and as we will try to demonstrate, image verification techniques can show both the opportunities and the limits of our own approach.

Regarding the reading of the examples chosen to display these theoretical contents, we will use both the classic concepts of audiovisual narratology (Gómez Tarín, 2011), as well as those other parameters specifically linked to the different methodologies of textual analysis (Marzal-Felici and Gómez Tarín 2007) that allow us to attend to the text as a space of meaning and, therefore -and this will occupy a large part of the journey that follows-, as *verification*.

4. Discussion

4.1. Of the truth of the audiovisual text and its (hypothetical) verification.

A few years ago, we had the opportunity to propose an approach to the issue that concerns us today (Rodríguez Serrano, 2017) in which we highlighted the difficulty of taking audiovisual materials as simple apophantic statements on which to delimit their ability to say the truth. At that time, we took a purely phenomenological approach and not without problems –especially regarding the revealing possibilities of the image– which, according to what has happened in the public sphere in recent years, urgently requires extensive rethinking.

In a political context marked by control mechanisms based on fear (Nussbaum, 2019) or the instability of discourses (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018), the claim of a truth status in images has little less than a distinctly quixotic flavor. In direct relation to the academic crisis of the humanities –and the dethroning of a qualitative knowledge by an apparently more rigorous *quantitative* procedure (Zunzunegui and Zumalde, 2018)–, it is not surprising that the audiovisual mechanisms of *post-truth* emerge as a direct consequence of the excesses committed in recent decades by the spectacularization of the media (Palao Errando, 2009), the mechanisms of the so-called *reality TV*, and lastly, the confusing communicative morass of social networks.

Faced with this confusing panorama, it seems sensible to begin by pointing out the two opposite polarities, the two theoretical options that mark both sides of the extreme: that of the minimum and the maximum faith in the possibility of images. The first of them, as is well known, has its roots in the theories of traditional iconoclasm, and, therefore, denies any kind of connection of truth between the image and its historical, political, or social referent. We must also point out that these positions are absolutely relevant in the contemporary media debate about the media treatment of the global pandemic. It is not surprising that the theories of the iconoclasts flourished, very precisely, in the shadow of trauma. Inspired by the documentary approaches of Claude Lanzmann (2011) and sometimes poorly digested by certain dogmatic positions sponsored by an accelerated appropriation of certain Lacanian approaches (Wajcman, 2001), the new iconoclasts deny any verification of the traumatic historical image. What the cameras pick up is always a remainder, an incomplete symbolization, unwanted information that inevitably ends up with the labels of "obscene",

"unethical", or very especially, based on the famous writing by Jacques Rivette (2010), "abject". Contact between the audience and the traumatic real can only take place through techniques related to narration, memory, or the mechanisms of the so-called "post-memory" (Hirsch, 2001), but not with the possibility of the image of saying something about what happened.

This position can be more clearly exemplified on the cover of *The New York Times* on Sunday, May 24th, 2020:



Image 5: Cover of May 24th, 2020.
Source: *The New York Times*.

Wildly celebrated as an exercise in journalistic subtlety, the cover of the *New York Times* explicitly rejects the use of images and instead organizes the duel as a strictly logocentric and diffusely narrative affair. The six columns that make up the staple show, precisely, that in their opinion, the memory seems refractory to the image itself, to what Bazin called the capacity for "mummification of time" (2001), thus denying its memorialistic function and directly preferring the writing of the name and a very brief review of the merits of life (profession, family role, political ideology). The visual construction of the cover peaks for its sobriety, for its reference to the famous mausoleums that have marked the history of the catastrophes of the 20th century –from the Monument to the Gate of Menin

to the Memorial of Bykivnia, to name just two examples—, depositing the work of remembrance in the out of the visual field. It is obvious that those names were faces, but the magnitude of the pandemic catastrophe makes it impossible to reproduce all their images and —this is what interests us most— iconoclastic theories would point out that the reproduction of the archives of their life would not offer any "informative" or even "affective" plus —rather the opposite— that is no longer precisely linked with the reproduction of their names and their biographies.

As the reader will suspect, in iconoclastic logic it makes no sense to speak of *verification* since the very idea is suspicious and meaningless. However, this idea can easily be put into crisis by the work of another series of theorists for whom, quite the contrary, it is impossible to understand the ecosystem of information and affections that dominates the world without taking very seriously the *significant* capacity of images, and, therefore, the need to generate discussion and verification processes around them. As Didi-Huberman rightly points out: “We know that iconoclasts only hate images so much because, deep down, they attribute a much greater power to them than that granted to them by the most convinced iconophile” (2004: 101). To deploy this idea, let us now take as an example the controversial photograph of Fernando Lázaro from *El Mundo* that served as the cover on April 8th, 2020, taken inside the Ice Palace track that served as a makeshift morgue for Covid-19 victims.



Image 6: Cover of April 8th, 2020. Author: Fernando Lázaro.
Source: *El Mundo*

Certainly, the postulates of the iconoclasts became apparent again after the inevitable avalanche of questions that followed the presentation of the photograph in the media and on social networks. The grieving process, generally located in the out of the visual field of the media, had emerged in all its harshness. At a very basic level of verification, the image already had enough veridiction traces: it had been published by a newspaper of recognized national prestige and seriousness, it was signed by a professional with an impeccable career, and apparently, it could not be detected in its reproduction a fraudulent, illegitimate use, or linked to any ideological program that wants to take advantage of its content through a partial reading to generate some type of political or economic profit. On a second

level, in fact, the image offered juicy visual contradictions that could have served to put into a crisis some of the inevitable sociological short-circuits that the pandemic aroused: the stark contrast between *commerce* – let us remember that the Ice Palace was a commercial macro-center located in the Hortaleza neighborhood, designed according to the usual canons of post-industrial economic exchange (Friedberg, 1993)– and *mourning*, the inability of postmodern societies to reactivate the mechanisms of symbolizing community or death (Lyon, 2000), and even how the real ends up engulfing the apparent purity of the heterotopias typical of the so-called non-places (Augé, 2005) that configure our time. The issue of *ruin* –which had already begun to be announced in the visual construction of the 2008 economic crisis (Apel, 2015; Marzal-Felici and Soler-Campillo, 2018)– reaches a new dimension here where the problem of validation cannot only go through the comparison between a *real* and an *imaginary* but requires an authentic “taking a position” –in the sense, again, outlined by Didi-Huberman (2013)– in which the media decides to establish itself as a *bearer* of memory based on a selection that, in this case, has its weaknesses and its strengths exclusively in the *photographic point of view*.

The photograph of Fernando Lázaro, beyond the personal judgments that may arouse in each reader, helps us to contrast it with the sadly notorious photomontage that, just a few days before, the political party *Vox* had shared on its social networks, and in which, somehow, the shadow of reality was hovering overhead, which would soon emerge on the cover reproduced in *El Mundo*.

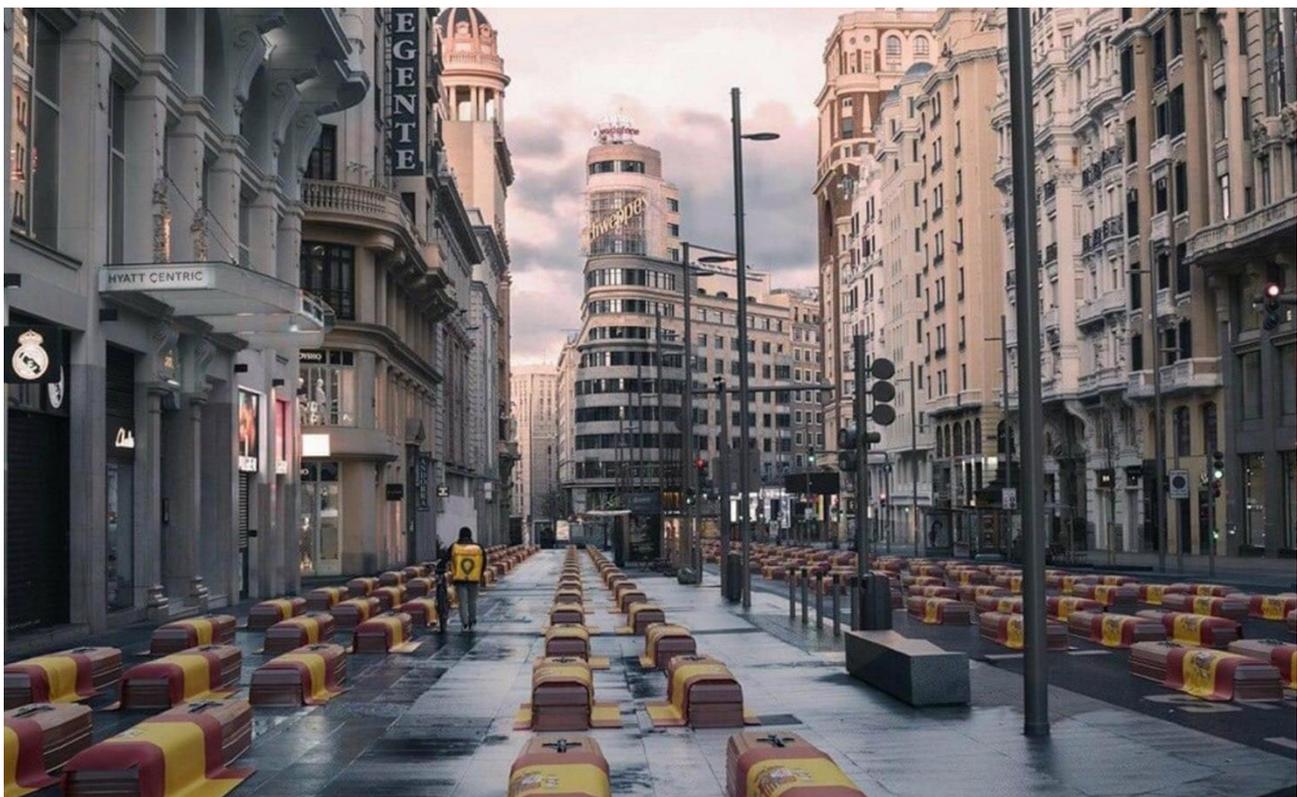


Image 7: *Photomontage offered by Vox on its social networks over an original photograph of Ignacio Pereira.*

Source: *Vox* Twitter account.

Certainly, the *Vox* case is interesting because of how it also updates the debates between "fictional image" and "historical image" that had emerged from the live broadcast of the 9/11 attacks (González Requena, 2002; Žižek, 2002). With certain exceptions, indeed, that directly concern the verification

process. First, one of the seemingly strongest veridiction marks in the process –the origin or source of the information– set a strange precedent. If a party located in the democratic sphere and with a not inconsiderable voter base felt legitimated to manipulate the photographic reality without offering a reading clue about the manipulation of signifiers –that is, without warning that it was a photomontage or a “symbolic” reappropriation– it is undoubtedly because its *truth* parameters do not coincide, in principle, with those that would be expected from a certain political *fair play*. First, because the very configuration of the image shows a *biased* and clearly *malicious* use of the identity of the victim. In the same way that the front page of the *New York Times* inevitably reflected the logic of American individualistic thought –each victim is a phrase, an isolated achievement almost always linked to their professional activity, a small encapsulated American dream that only suggests the complexity of the *total set* of the deceased–, the non-verifiable image of *Vox* acts in an opposite direction: all the victims, all the coffins –we invite the comparison with the real photograph of *El Mundo*– are crowned by two powerful symbolic operators: a crucifix and a flag of Spain. In other words, all the victims have a patriotic and religious identity, making their death a kind of piece clearly linked to the national and Catholic project that the party itself proposes. Taken to the extreme, reading the image can only suggest two things: that the only vindicable victims are their own –the non-Catholic or non-patriotic dead should be expelled, again, out of the field– or that all deaths are, in essence, ideological deaths veiled in view of the supposed ineptitude of those responsible for the measures against the pandemic.

In parallel to the more than thorny textual reading of the image, and again in strict terms of verification, what draws our attention is that the manipulated photograph belongs to our time with chilling precision due to the aforementioned failure in the reliability of the source –a political party that calls itself democratic, that is, concerned about the responsibility of its relationship with the *truth* for the people–, but not least, its precise transmission through a social network (*Twitter*), whose commitment to the minimum standards of formation of the citizenry is, to say the least, debatable (Keller et al., 2020; Pierri, Piccardi, and Ceri, 2020). As Todorov already pointed out in his diagnosis of the enemies of democracy:

The promoters of populist movements tend to look favorably on the internet and social networks because this dissemination of information escapes any centralized control and democratic consensus. It is a revenge of the periphery over the center, of extremism over moderation. The private discourse that circulates on the Internet should not be subject to the obligations that weigh on public discourses (Todorov, 2012: 152).

Therefore, by refocusing the issue that keeps open the debate between iconoclasts and theorists in favor of a verifiable use of images, we can point out at least one possible way in which theory can circulate today without falling into the traps of populism or “anything goes” typical of the champions of *post-truth*.

4.2. In favor of the possibility of the *position*. Apology of the audiovisual fact-checker.

Jacques Rancière, in one of his most famous works on the nature of the unrepresentable (2011), pointed out that the problems of the debate about the correct display of an event should explicitly go through reflection on the *context*, and not so much through the “absolute” closure or the inability to convey with absolute precision the “essence” of an event. The problem of saying is not in the *subject* –an absolute category to which it is foolish, as well as unrealistic, to demand total objectivity or transparency– but rather in what each analyst does with the *limits* of the saying of each image. This is where the main problem of fact-checking comes in: the assumption of a certain failure, a deficit that does not obscure the need for its exercise. Said more clearly: verifying an image is always making a *partial* statement regarding the focus and depth of its content, placing it within the framework of a

certain reading, generating coordinates that allow not so much its apophantic classification as *true* or *false*, but simply –and here is, in our opinion, the key–, to analyze with precision and rigor its meaning processes.

Whoever detects behind this idea a more or less fortunate translation of the traditional figure of the textual analyst –and, by extension, of one of our most esteemed methodologies, critical discourse analysis–, in the contemporary figure of the fact-checker, without a doubt, will not be mistaken. As is often the case in historical processes, precisely once trends seemed to have relegated –at least, regarding the University Academy– the analysis of images to a discreet position (Nieto Ferrando and Aranzubía Cob, 2020; Rodríguez Serrano, Palao Errando, and Marzal-Felici, 2019), there is an inevitable “return of the repressed” at the hands of the urgency derived from our edu-communication deficits. In a society in which –we will return to this idea– study plans based on mechanisms of clear neoliberal inspiration (education for companies) have been promoted at the cost of cutting back on humanistic skills or critical reflection, suddenly we find ourselves with the inevitable paradox of wild polarization, rampant misinformation, and, in our specific case, the absolute impossibility of a large part of the public to read the torrent of messages they receive. Obviously, the position is not only about generating “verification agencies” that work with transparency, rigor, and the maximum possible clarity, but in parallel, taking this social need to its extreme: putting on the table, at once, that you cannot be a citizen responsible for your own decisions in the 21st century without having minimal skills to criticize audiovisual discourse.

The issue of the “democratization” of images, as happened with so many other –paradoxical– achievements of the 21st century, arose, of course, from the best of intentions. When the pioneers of the North American counterculture –we are thinking, specifically, of the famous *On Film Journalism and Newsreels* by Jonas Mekas (retrieved from Kahana, 2016)– began to celebrate the expansion of low format cameras (8 and 16 mm), they did not only think of reformulating the entire audiovisual system, from criticism to an exhibition (Mekas, 2013) but very specifically, of making visible, through an awareness of the possibilities of the image, those groups that had traditionally remained distant of the narrative and stylistic codes of both the dominant journalism and the fictionalizations of the Institutional Mode of Representation. The emergence of the underground in the United States (Mendik and Jay Schneider, 2002), generated palpable effects in fields such as feminism or LGTB+ identities that would end, over the years, crystallizing in the academies through Cultural Studies. However, a simple look at part of the contemporary bibliography about the relationship between the “legitimacy” of the images –again, the problem of their “veridiction marks” and the processes to systematize their contextualization and judgment by the agencies– and their status of truth, not only seems to have shifted rather little from the initial positions of Mekas but, in the most extreme cases, we can even detect a kind of aberrated effect of them. This idea is worth dwelling on.

Perhaps the most relevant theorist regarding the relationship between *truth* and *audiovisual format* is the German Hito Steyerl. Based on her more than stimulating reflection on “poor images” (Steyerl, 2014), the author proposed a kind of celebration of the aesthetic strategies that emerged from the public: images shot with mobile phones, of low quality, mounted with free software, and distributed directly over the internet. Techniques such as *glittering*, *pixelation*, or the vindication of “digital noise” were not only “marks of veridiction”, but also profound political-aesthetic positions that guaranteed not only the *truth* but also the *legitimacy* of a citizen saying. Steyerl contrasted the system with the “perfect images” distributed by CNN or the mainstream media, based on the use of traditional framing and visual noise. Steyerl's logic was undoubtedly part of both her consistent intellectual apparatus and her own praxis in the field of audiovisual essay, where she had already experimented with filming with mobile phones –*Abstract* (2012)– or with chromas and techniques of purely rudimentary motion capture –*Liquidity Inc* (2014) or *Factory of the Sun* (2015)–. If we bring

up her thought, it is not only an extraordinary break with iconoclastic approaches but precisely because of the highly intelligent updating displayed on the seminal theories of Mekas and his disciples.

Now, as we pointed out, the biggest problem fact-checkers who work in the field of the image are currently facing, is precisely that, from denialism, the positions of the conspiracy theory or the movements that explicitly seek to twitch citizenry, has naturally inherited that domain of the “poor image”. It is enough to make a quick scan through the videos linked to the anti-vaccine movement that we referred to at the beginning of the article to make a brief systematization of the audiovisual resources that come our way: subtitles with spelling mistakes, supposed “evidence” extracted from image banks –sometimes with their watermark–, use of large blocks of text or *emojis* from the *TikTok* or *Instagram* interfaces. The broadcasts “extracted” from “international newscasts” do not hide their pixelation and the montage cuts show discontinuity between the *raccord*, as well as between the video tracks and the original audio. It is the inexperienced hand of the subject that decides to “re-edit” or “reappropriate” –value the ironic reference to the artistic strategy of contemporary art–foreign materials, that reveals their inability to control the normative “veridiction marks”, thus collapsing into a paradox: Steyerl's poor images –and, let's say it clearly, also educational and creative projects as deeply debatable as Rancière's *bricoleur* (see the sharp and very pertinent criticism in Alonso-García, 2010) –, end up leading to a dead-end: just as the documentary had to finally reject its inability to find an undoubted strategy for encountering and transmitting reality, in the contemporary flow of audiovisual messages there is no single strategy or an unquestionable process that allow to calculate and systematize the degrees of truth. And, as we pointed out previously, no matter how much the verification agencies are generating an immense work, our bet is even more radical and rests on that request so many times repeated and so few times listened to: the formation of a critical citizenry capable of carrying out autonomous work –as small as it may be– in reading the images.

5. Final reflections

5.1. Images in the post-truth era

It is evident that images play a leading role in the misinformation society, due to their omnipresence and ability to arouse, at times credulity, at others to provoke the most diverse reactions among viewers –especially emotional ones–, appropriating them when they circulate on social media. In this way, never before “has the image experienced so many tears, so many contradictory claims, and so many crossed repudiations, so many immoral manipulations and moralizing execrations” (Didi-Huberman, 2012: 10). In the first place, images have a very direct impact on the construction of the collective imaginary, which is why they have a marked anthropological character, insofar as they contribute to constructing collective identity and its developments in public life (Belting, 2007), whose main battlefield is social networks (O1). Secondly, the form of the images, as discursive representations, has textual characteristics that speak to us of the point of view they contain and of the articulation of the point of view of an enunciative instance, which masks –with more or less dissimulation– an ideology or world view, which can remain more or less invisible, but is never completely absent, because representation can never be absolutely transparent, although the current regime of images is that of hypervisibility. In this sense, the analysis of misinformative images that circulate on social networks or that are framed in informational contexts are never “innocent”, they always show traces of veridiction from the perspective of textual analysis (O2).

As various authors have pointed out, from a strictly discursive point of view, speaking of “post-truth”, of “deception and misrepresentation” discourses, would seem to manifest the existence of

“pristine, depoliticized, and quasi-religious discursive strongholds” (Carrera, 2018: 1471). From semiotic thought, informative or documentary discourse is always a rhetorical device because the enunciation that every discourse utters is never transparent. For this reason, documentary cinema – based on the construction of the “effect of meaning” of the “illusion of the real” – cannot be more “real” than fiction cinema since they obey different strategies of construction of meaning (Carrera and Talens, 2018; Zumalde and Zunzunegui, 2019).

But images are also symbolic productions that are closely related to their cultural contexts and, therefore, contain a strong ideological charge that is related to the political, economic, social, and cultural environment where they arise. Some scholars attribute the rise of fake news and disinformation to a certain academic environment generated in Western universities in recent decades, where a certain aversion to truth and facts seems to have been nurtured (Andrade, 2013), an interpretation that seems to ignore the nature of postmodern thought, whose roots are markedly deconstructionist and critical of the great stories of the Western tradition, among which “the order of the real” – “post-truth” – stands out, which Lyotard put into crisis in his well-known work *The Postmodern Condition* (1987).

We have referred to images that circulate on social networks, which need a “validation” that allows determining their “truth value”, with the help of fact-checkers and the necessary fact-checking agencies. But what about other types of images, such as the photographs published by the mainstream media, which are accredited by prestigious news agencies or by international photojournalism awards? Do they not present expressive, narrative, and enunciative elements that reveal –by definition– the existence of an ideological “bias”? A brief examination of some images can help us to clarify this issue.

The photograph of F. Dilek Uyar (Image 8), winner of the “Street Photography” category of the prestigious Sony World Awards in 2021, one of many images that we have seen about the Coronavirus pandemic, presents a high level of formal complexity. It is a composition with depth-of-field, with highly saturated colors that express the idea of conflict –through the strong contrast of tones between the dominant orange inside the subway cars and the dominant blue color on the platform– which adds to the contrast of sharpness between the inside of the subway car and the mist outside in the platform. In the image, coinciding with the vanishing point, the figure of the employee who is disinfecting this space with a chemical product stands out, a very common activity in this time of a pandemic. These are shades with strong color saturation that manage to build an image with a strong structure, which has a marked spectacular character, creating a view that causes the viewer to be estranged.

Image 9 is a photograph by Emilio Morenatti, from the Associated Press agency, which shows the image of a health worker –known as a “body collector”– dragging a stretcher on which a body can be seen completely covered by a mortuary bag, with a composition in depth-of-field, accentuated by the walls of a narrow corridor, which causes a feeling of suffocation and unease in the viewer.



Image 8: *Photograph by F. Dilek Uyar, winner of the “Street Photography” category. Ankara railway station.*

Source: Sony World Photography Awards 2021



Image 9: *Photograph of Emilio Morenatti.*

Source: Associated Press

Lastly, the portrait of a doctor, at the end of her working day in a hospital in Mexico City, taken on May 19th, 2020 by photographer Iván Maicas, allows us to become aware of the extreme harshness of the work carried out by this professional –and all health personnel, by extension– who, after a long working day, allows the imprint of protective glasses and mask to be seen on her face. As if it were a traditional portrait, the doctor looks at the camera, a transcript of the viewer, displaying enunciative transparency: the extreme sharpness of the image becomes a visual element that demands the viewer's solidarity. It is a photograph that challenges us and invites us to identify with the protagonist and to show solidarity with her situation.



Image 10: *Photograph of Iván Macías. Finalist photograph in the "Portrait" category. Source: World Press Photo 2021*

These few examples can serve to illustrate that the work of validating images must be complemented with carrying out textual analyzes, which allow us to understand how they construct meaning, a necessary exercise to become aware of the discursive and constructed character of any visual text (Marzal-Felici, 2007; Marzal-Felici, 2021).

The current context of disinformation and strong pressure to which journalism professionals are subjected has to lead to the demand for other ways of exercising it. It is obvious that over-information and infoxication, and an insatiable hunger to make the work of journalists profitable from the management of many news companies –whose employees are in a precarious job situation to unsuspected limits– can only be neutralized with the assumption of other ways to understand journalism, such as the so-called “slow journalism”, whose practices must be vindicated (Barranquero Carreto and Jaurrieta, 2016; Romero-Rodríguez, Tejedor, and Castillo-Abdul, 2021).

In recent years, various institutional reports have highlighted the need to articulate policies to combat disinformation, mainly through the so-called “information literacy”, through initiatives promoted by the Council of Europe (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; Chapman and Oerman, 2020). Because we must not ignore that, even among many citizens supposedly trained in the use of new technologies, there is also a certain “functional illiteracy”: it is not about handling information and communication technologies, but about knowing how to use them critically. Some researchers confirm the presence of “illiterate internet users”, that is, people who lack “the critical capacity and sufficient media competence for the correct filtering of the content they consume, create, and share” (Romero-Rodríguez and Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2019: 388). In this context, media education constitutes a social need of the first order.

5.2. Media education: a political, social, educational, and cultural emergency

The third of the objectives (O3) raised by this manuscript referred to the need to examine the challenges that our educational system must face in the training of fact-checkers and educators with advanced skills in image analysis and media education.

There is a resounding coincidence between scholars of edu-communication when it comes to pointing out that the most effective way to combat fake news and the context of disinformation is through the construction of “a media ecology or 'infodiet' that balances both the quantitative-qualitative relationship of the information we receive, as well as allowing us to gradually deinfoxify ourselves from the overload of empty content...” (Aguaded and Romero-Rodríguez, 2015: 54). Indeed, the new digital scene has generated a media space in which users, as *prosumers*, also share and produce content that frequently viralizes and replicates fake news, thus aggravating the misinformation we suffer. The fact-checking methodology should, therefore, be seen as an important contribution to improve the quality of journalism, but also to improve the media skills of citizens (Lotero-Echeverri, Romero-Rodríguez, and Pérez Rodríguez, 2018). Some agencies specialized in fact-checking, such as *Maldita.es*, *Newtral*, or *Verficat.cat*, have, among others, a wide training offer, aimed at a wide audience, from secondary education centers, universities, and even citizen associations and groups.

Thus, media literacy or education is a necessary tool to learn to differentiate between manipulated and untouched images (Domínguez-Rigo, 2020) but, above all, to learn to critically read images (and also to create them), understanding that every image is a discursive construction that offers us a certain vision of the world, as the result of an enunciative act.

Currently, the low quality of our media system, the multiplication of *TV trash*, and the fact that social networks have become a loudspeaker of hoaxes and fake news, behaviors such as cyberbullying or school bullying, and, even, accelerate the circulation of hate messages are a cause for concern. Indeed, it is found that in recent years a few media outlets have taken the initiative when applying fact-checking, which, without a doubt, can be interpreted as a process of professional self-regulation, absolutely necessary to improve the quality of journalism (Gallardo-Camacho and Marta-Lazo, 2020). But it cannot be forgotten that the application of these techniques has a positive impact on the reputation of news companies, an intangible asset of enormous value amid the strong reputational crisis that journalism is suffering, especially in our country. In this sense, it should be noted that in Spain we still lack an Audiovisual Council, which our Constitution of 1978 provided, an independent body that would serve, among other things, to carry out surveillance work and, at the same time, to promote good practices in journalism and communication.

Half a century after the arrival of democracy in our country, amid the crisis due to the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, the serious health crisis has been compounded by the multiplication of fake news, the expansion of an environment of disinformation and infoxication, and the crisis of an educational system that was not prepared for remote training and the challenges of the new digital society. A few months ago, Professor Joan Ferrés noted that even today, the study plans for the Master's Degrees in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education in Spanish universities present a serious training deficit in the field of media education, which includes not only competencies in the use of educational technologies, but also the development of critical capacities, sensitivity, and creativity to analyze and create audiovisual messages (Ferrés, 2020). Given the extraordinary relevance that communication has in our society, it seems a really serious anachronism that media and audiovisual training does not have a greater presence in the entire educational system and, as would be logical, also in the curricula of the Degrees in Education, as well as in the Master's Degree in Teacher Training.

This situation has led to the writing of a manifesto entitled "Edu-communication in Spain: An urgent challenge for the digital society", at the initiative of professors Ignacio Aguaded, from the University of Huelva, and Javier Marzal Felici, from the Jaume I University, which has the support of 100 leading teachers in the fields of communication and education in our country, to demand actions from the public administration to promote progress in this field. The document, which can be consulted at <https://www.edu-comunicacion.es>, proposes the creation of Double Degrees in Teacher in Education and Communication, to train educators with high communication skills, which would be of great help to introduce profound changes in our educational system. A work proposal that would be of undoubted relevance to better understand the enormous complexity involved in the question "What does it mean to validate an image?"

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