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J A Muñoz-Velázquez and J Lozano Delmar (2019): “The fake first round about the Earth. The case of the supposed Chinese circumnavigation of 1421 from the post-truth paradigm”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 950 to 968.

<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1366/49en.html>

DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2019-1366en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1366en)



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The fake first round about the Earth. The case of the supposed Chinese circumnavigation of 1421 from the post- truth paradigm

Who controls the past, controls the future.
George Orwell

José Antonio Muñoz-Velázquez [[CV](#)] [[ID](#)] [[ORCID](#)] Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Loyola Andalucía University, Sevilla, Spain / jamuniz@uloyola.es

Javier Lozano Delmar [[CV](#)] [[ID](#)] [[ORCID](#)] Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Loyola Andalucía University, Sevilla, Spain / jlozano@uloyola.es

Abstract

Introduction. Five hundred years ago, Magellan undertook a trip that would end up being, in the hands of Juan Sebastián Elcano, the first round the world. But, surprising as it may seem, not everyone accepts this

historical truth. Such is the case of the book *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, published with remarkable success in 2002, and with successive editions and translations. Its author, Gavin Menzies, constructs a story about this alternative fact: a Chinese expedition completed the first globe circumnavigation a century before the Spanish expedition. **Methodology.** A case study research of Menzies' book and its impact is proposed. To do this, we will start with the study question: How and why a false story around a historical event is nowadays constructed and disseminated? And how this fake history is counteracted? To do that, we will analyze multiple sources of evidence such as discourses and documentation in online environment. **Results.** The study underlines that the impact of the book starts right during the beginning of the so-called post-truth era, and it increases coinciding with these propitious moments for the propagation of fake news and fake history. Once analysed the evidences, it is verified how historical *alternative facts* like these are created, transmitted, and maintained in time, and how commercial and also propagandistic interests can be behind of something like this. **Conclusions.** Not even the well-known first round the world by Magallanes-Elcano is safe from the misinformation in the current era of post-truth. It is therefore important to remember once again the need to teach and spread historical truths in a rigorous, but also attractive and seductive way. At least as much as the fake history usually does. The disruptive stories of pseudohistory and conspiracy theories always will have a huge attraction for a part of the public, a public further increasing nowadays due to the digital ecosystem in which we live.

Keywords

Fake news, fake history, post-truth, circumnavigation, Gavin Menzies

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
(PhD in Communication, University of London)

1. Introduction: From Magellan-Elcano to the Chinese fleet

The fifth centenary of the first voyage around the world, initiated by Ferdinand Magellan in 1519 and completed three years later at the hands of Juan Sebastián Elcano, is commemorated from 2019 to 2022. For many, this first circumnavigation of the Earth was the greatest achievement in the history of human exploration, at least until the moon landing (Joyner, 1992, p. 3). These sea explorers gave humanity the first real basis to conceive more precisely continents and oceans, as well as the planet itself. Needless to say, this feat had geographical, political, philosophical, scientific, and even theological and metaphysical implications because, although there already existed a spherical conception of the world that was more or less shared by many (Bueno, 1989), no one had empirically verified it until then.

It should be noted that this first voyage around the world was never premeditated, or at least there is no proof that it was so (Brotton, 2012, p. 240). The men led by Magellan set sailed looking for, among many other things (Muñiz-Velázquez and López Casquete de Prado, 2018), treasures. The islands that were part of the goal of Magellan's expedition were the Spice Islands, or the Moluccas (part of what is now Indonesia). Magellan, a wandering sea knight, in the words of Fernández-Armesto (2006), was working on the hypothesis of a route to Asia through the Americas. When his

proposal was vehemently rejected by Portuguese monarch Manuel I (Rodríguez González, 2018, p. 39), he sought the sponsorship of the neighbouring monarch, King Charles I of Spain, who welcomed the proposal and facilitated the expedition with the financial support of his own bankers (Brotton, 2012, p. 244; Fernández-Armesto, 2006, p. 290). It was precisely for that reason that Kelsey (2016), among others, did not hesitate to describe the expedition as “Spanish”, and not Portuguese. In fact, the Spanish expedition had to play “cat and mouse” with the Portuguese fleets to avoid being intercepted during much of the voyage (Brotton, 2012, p. 246). It is not surprising, therefore, that the two Iberian countries have had ups and downs in relation to this feat throughout history (García Calero, 2019). However, this clash is not the object of our study, but the historiographic and communicative battle that started at the beginning of the 21st century around another alleged first round-the-world expedition.

As Chaplin has point out (2012, 2013), many circumnavigations have been completed after the one achieved by Magellan and Elcano in 1522, but none before it. However, as unbelievable as it may seem, not everyone accepts this historical truth. Such is the case of British author Gavin Menzies and his book *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, published with remarkable success in 2002, and with successive editions and translations. This author builds a story that revolves around the allegation that it was a Chinese expedition, under the overall command of famous admiral Zheng He, the one to complete the first circumnavigation of the globe, a century before the Spanish expedition, and also the first one to discover the Americas, before Columbus.

Certainly, it seems that Zheng He (1371-1433) was a remarkable sailor (Boorstin, 1985; Fernández-Armesto, 2006; Joyner, 1992; Paine, 2013), who was at the forefront of much of the Chinese power in the zenith of its oceanic dominance during the Ming dynasty. In fact, Joyner (1992, p. 13) recognises China as one of the world’s “early seafarers” and one of the first “sea peoples” in history. But beyond that, there is no scientific evidence to confirm that a Chinese expedition completed a journey around the world at that time, or arrived in the Americas and Europe (Davenport, 2003; Fritze, 2002, 2009b; Steele, 2005; Thompson, 2008). However, Gavin Menzies, a retired British submarine lieutenant-commander born in China, questions, despite not being a historian, the “official version” of the first circumnavigation based on the role of China in the world during the Renaissance. The attention will focus on one of the most outstanding achievements in history: the first time humans experienced the sphericity of the Earth.

2. Gavin Menzies and his version of the first voyage around the world

Beretta and Conforti (2014) point out that history has always been fertile ground for false stories. An event like the first circumnavigation of the globe, which has been historically and scientifically verified and apparently innocuous from the political and ideological points of view, is neither safe from it. According to Brotton (2012, p. 240), none of all the great European voyages and discoveries “has been as badly interpreted as the first circumnavigation of the globe”, but this is not an obstacle to highlight the fact that such a feat eclipses the rest of the achievements made during its time and many others. Beyond the abovementioned Spanish-Portuguese clash and the controversy surrounding the true transcendence of the feat in the short and medium term (Kamen, 2014, P. 83; Fernández-Armesto, 2006, p. 292), the veracity of the completion of “the first-ever circumnavigation of the Earth” by the Magellan-Elcano expedition had never been questioned (Brotton, 2012, p. 246) until the arrival of Gavin Menzies.

Menzies begins his story with the genesis of his book, describing it as a crusade that began, always according to the author, after he had a sort of epiphany in the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota, where he stumbled upon a “clue hidden” in a map sketched by Zuane Pizzigano in 1424 (Menzies, 2002, p. 20). In the map in question, Menzies distinguished some North American islands and being it a pre-Columbian map, he connected it with China and its early 15th century voyages. Menzies turned the map into the book’s key argumentative piece, along with two other maps that he found later (Rojas Sandoval, 2004).

As stated in the book’s synopsis, over fifteen years, the author carried out “a research work” that enabled the reconstruction of those alleged Chinese expeditions of the 15th century, which resulted in a “bold and rigorous, monumental and exciting book that deserves the respect of the scientific community” (Menzies, 2002). He finishes this synopsis with the promise that the reading of the book will force us “to change our view of the age of the great European discoveries”.

Grosso modo, Menzies narrates how the so-called largest Chinese fleet of all time would spread across the oceans to reach Africa, the Americas, Europe and Australia, to finally complete the circumnavigation of the globe. Thus, the different Chinese admirals would have reached the Americas seventy years before Columbus, discovered Australia 350 years before Cook and circumnavigated the globe a century before Elcano. However, none of these expeditions left their mark on those supposedly contacted places, nor changed the historical future of China. The cause of it, Menzies argues, would be that, after the return of all these expeditions, the emperor changed his master plan, turned his back on the sea, and all documentary evidence of the previous maritime expansionism were destroyed voluntary or accidentally. These epic voyages were, therefore, doomed to oblivion until Menzies found enough evidence to resurrect them (Menzies, 2002, p. 452).

As mentioned, it is true that Zheng He was able to reach the cusp of navigation back then (Prazniak, 2010), and that China at that time was already a world superpower, as it was the “first modern state” in many senses (Fernández-Armesto, 2010, p. 228). Not in vain,

A world observer in the 15th century would certainly have predicted that China would precede the other peoples in the feat of completing the circumnavigation of the planet, in the opening of transoceanic routes and in the establishment of a maritime empire. [But the truth is that] in fact, none of that took place, and the way was left free for the much less promising European explorers to become the ones to discover the routes around the world (Fernández-Armesto, 2006, p. 179).

In any case, expeditions were abruptly cancelled in 1433 and China, indeed, turned to itself for several reasons: the cost-benefit of expeditions, new interests, threats and priorities of a new oligarchy, etc. (Fernández-Armesto, 2010, p. 242; Joyner, 1992, p. 14; Paine, 2013, p. 420; Sen, 2016, p. 612). Thus, “other less powerful countries, including the European ones, managed to seize the opportunities to which the Chinese power had renounced in the sea” (Fernández-Armesto, 2010, p. 247). Menzies (2002) cannot deny such evidence, but he would put it differently. He insisted that, after the withdrawal of China, Portuguese and Spanish people “enjoyed a glory that rightfully belonged to others” and that “the time has finally come for us to restore the balance of history and give the merits to those who really deserve them” (Menzies, 2002, p. 466). Menzies claims that “affirming the primacy of China in the exploration of the New World and Australia is not tantamount to denigrate the achievements and memory of Dias, Columbus, Magellan and Cook” (Menzies, 2002, p. 466), but his own pages suggest otherwise.

In parallel, Menzies claims (2002, p. 465) that “instead of the educated Chinese, who had been instructed to ‘treat the distant peoples with kindness’, the cruel and almost barbaric Christians became the colonisers”. In contrast, Fernández-Armesto (2010, p. 242) points out that the power and domination relations that the Chinese were also seeking to establish wherever they arrived were equally or even more aggressive than those of the Europeans. Zheng He, the so-called “ambassador of friendship”, was a clear exponent of proto-colonialism, according to Sen (2005), and was not so different in terms of intentions and manners from the European travellers. Also for Wade (2005), the Chinese expeditions were precisely acts of invasion in favour of an expansionist policy.

It seems, therefore, that neither the Chinese were so peaceful and disinterested, nor the others were so belligerent and harmful. However, as we can see, this polarisation in favour of the Chinese will be something that Menzies delves into, thus building a version of the past that fits, in the epic and moral dimensions, with the interests and the economic importance of today’s China. As Melleuish, Sheiko and Brown (2009, p. 1492) indicate, this country needs “the world to have a much larger view of its roles in shaping world history”, so it is not surprising that, despite the scientific evidence against, the Chinese Communist Party supported Menzies’s book (Goodman, 2006, p. 212), and that its promotion was supported from the beginning by the Chinese government (Steele, 2005, p. 278). Richardson (2008, p. 34) narrates how China’s president defended the book’s thesis that China had discovered Australia in the 15th century before the Australian Parliament on 24 October 2003, an act that was used by Menzies to legitimise his book.

As we see, the political, propaganda, economic and commercial dimensions are closely intertwined in the historiographic battle, and “China’s growing economic, strategic and even cultural roles have not been oblivious to the rewriting of its past, which has come to arouse certain Sinocentric exaggeration” (Taboada, 2007, p. 761). In 2005, an exhibition about Zheng He was held in Singapore. The objective was to celebrate the 6th centenary of his first great voyage and to vindicate the importance of the great Chinese explorations against the European navigators of the Renaissance (Folch, 2008). The Singapore Tourism Board, together with many other agents, actively participated in the promotion of Menzies’s book (Prazniak, 2010). The claim that China discovered the Americas before Columbus and circumnavigated the world before Magellan, and that it achieved such feats in a less warlike manner than the Europeans, was appealing enough to take advantage of it. Thus, Menzies’s book had a wide impact in the *fasti*, which faced numerous protests from the scientific and academic community and even in China. The Singapore Tourism Board responded that it neither endorsed or rejected Menzies’s claims, and that the public should be allowed to make up their own minds about his book’s veracity.

Therefore, the battlefield was already defined. There is a neutrality that, according to studies on post-truth, pseudoscience and pseudohistory, is clearly fallacious, as McIntyre warns us (2018). It is fallacious because it is not half way between two opposing authoritative voices that have full scientific evidence, but between a voice that has got it and another than has not. As we will see, post-truth will make the most out of it.

3. Pseudohistory and Post-truth

Menzies’s work canonically exemplifies how even a historical truth beyond the shadow of doubt can be attacked with disinformation and questioned by an alternative, pseudohistorical *truth*. As Melleuish, Sheiko and Brown (2009, p. 1485) point out, pseudo-historians, or weird history writers,

as the authors also call them, consider that what they are writing a history that “corrects” the alleged mistakes of professional historians, who dominate the field but are caught up in methodological and academic limitations.

This is precisely one of the success factors of pseudohistorical narratives, the subversion of a supposedly established order. These writers are normally outsiders, so their legitimacy does not rely on confrontation with peers, but on the admiration of the public that welcomes these narratives. Another success factor, according to Melleuish, Sheiko and Brown (2009, p. 1492), revolves around the *zeitgeist* of the time. In other words, successful pseudohistorical narratives often revolve around more or less widespread concerns of the present, such as national identities, natural disasters and power relations. Thus, Menzies and his team show great mastery in their way of proceeding, which is fully analysable from contemporary models of misinformation and post-truth politics.

In general, post-truth is defined as the “subordination of truth to political interests” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 180) and, in our view, also economic and social interests. It also implies the subordination of objective facts to emotions and beliefs. All of which is not a new phenomenon (O’Connor and Weatherall, 2019; Tattersall & Nevraumont, 2018; Tucher, 1994), especially if we think of war scenarios (Iglesias Rodríguez, 1997; Schulze Schneider, 2001). But the truth is that technology has marked a turning point in the construction and dissemination of lies (Jacomella, 2017). Today, from the liquid paradigm so profusely described by Bauman (2000), the past is also the subject of a revisionism lubricated by postmodernism, “the godfather of post-truth” in McIntyre’s words (2018, p. 16). Although it is possible that the concept of post-truth is becoming common place and can be abused (Carrera, 2018), we are facing a phenomenon that is unprecedented in the history of mankind in quantitative and qualitative terms.

The main threat today looms over confidence in scientific certainty and, thus, over rational thinking itself (McIntyre, 2018, p. 16). Not in vain, the contemporary era of post-truth was inaugurated largely by scientific denial, as McIntyre (2018) points out: nicotine addiction, climate change, vaccines, etc., which are fallacious debates that seek to cast a shadow of doubt on scientific evidence, which is never a 100% objective true precisely due to the scientific method and its Popperian principles. It is here where the Merchants of Doubt (Oreskes & Conway, 2010) promote scepticism under a deceitful equidistance, given that “the halfway point between truth and error is still error” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 102). Thus, the floodgates of suspicion, and at the same time of the utmost credulity, are open. The media, by the way, would have to sing the *mea culpa*, as they often privilege controversy over truth for ratings.

For many reasons, we can see how the case of Gavin Menzies and his book fits perfectly with the contemporary pattern of post-truth politics. Following the analysis carried out, among others, by McIntyre (2018), we could identify a series of elements that constitute a pseudohistorical post-truth of success, all of which are perfectly visible in the case of the British author:

1. **Extravagance:** post-truth raises questions about a certain extravagant affair that welcomes sensationalism. Thus, the hypotheses of pseudo-historians “usually contain spectacular affirmations” (Fritze, 2009b, p. 22).
2. **Emotion:** above all, post-truth is an emotional phenomenon (D’Ancona, 2017), since emotions are more important than facts. In our case, the idea that Chinese vessels circumnavigated the globe for the first time is always “an exciting story” (Goodman, 2006, p. 212).

3. **Evidence:** there is nil evidence in scientific terms, so its importance is played down. Beyond conviction, and emotion, no unbiased evidence, nor the scientific method used to endorse it, can be produced.
4. **Establishment:** it will be necessary to inoculate the suspicion that experts, historians in our case, are partial and hide interests, i.e., to condemn them as a “malicious cartel”, in the words of D’Ancona (2017, p. 18). Thus, the fall of scientific authority and respect for knowledge are served, and “unhealthy relativism” (D’Ancona, 2017, p. 63) is at its widest.
5. **Niche market:** manage to inoculate the controversy at least in a minimum share of the public. With the new horizontal channels of dissemination, like social networks, this minimal critical mass can feed itself, maintain itself and even grow exponentially in a short time.
6. **Predisposition:** the assembly with preconceived ideas related to the post-truth in question is made convenient, as well as the accommodation to the ideology of the target public. Thus, confirmatory bias and others clearly irrational biases (Sutherland, 1992) will work in favour.
7. **The medium is the message:** based on McLuhan’s classic paradigm, the weight of the written word is inexorable. The very appearance of a message in any digital medium or outlet is a guarantor of sufficient legitimacy for much of the citizenry. In the case of Menzies, the production by the American Public Broadcasting System (PBS) of a documentary about its book is paradigmatic. Menzies ignores the many criticisms that appear in it and propagates the mere fact that the PBS dedicates a documentary to him, taking it as proof of his legitimacy (Fritze, 2009b).
8. **Third parties:** in the dissemination of a post-truth it is important to implicate third parties. That is, institutions, organisations and celebrities. Being experts or not on the subject is not important. The key is to convince a celebrity to talk about the pseudohistorical thesis (Rubin, Chen & Conroy, 2015). In Menzies’s case this is a constant.

4. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this work is to study the dissemination of Gavin Menzies’s story of the first circumnavigation of the world and how it penetrates as an alternative story to the Magellan-Elcano voyage around the world. The second objective is equally important: to build a case study that improves our understanding of the construction of a historical post-truth in such a way that it can contribute to future research on similar cases.

With this in mind, we will follow the case study method. According to Yin (2014, p. 29), this method helps us understand complex phenomena, especially those of social nature. In other words, the case study method allows us, by focusing on a given example, to maintain a holistic perspective. Yin tells us that there are three key components that guide the design research towards data collection. First, the research question. Second, its hypothesis, which should be added to the research question to move in the right direction, telling us where to look for evidence. And, third, a well-defined unit of analysis. Therefore, in our case, Yin’s formulation is as follows:

Research question: How and why is Gavin Menzies’s story of the first circumnavigation of the world disseminated and legitimised?

Hypothesis: The story is built on the basis of the scattering of information and the construction of post-truth.

Unit of Analysis (the case): Gavin Menzies's book *1421: The Year China Discovered America*.

Thus, for data collection, we decided to perform content analysis on two of the six sources of evidence proposed by Yin (2014, p. 106): documentation and direct observation. To this end, we studied the scientific and academic debate generated by Menzies's book to evaluate the critical approach to the work, presenting the scientific arguments that contrast and dismantle the post-truth of Menzies's discourse. To understand the complexity and scope of the phenomenon and the scientific response to Menzies's discourse, we carried out a search on Web of Science, Scopus, Google Books and Google Scholar, using the following keywords: "Gavin Menzies", "Chinese Circumnavigation" and "Zheng He". On the other hand, we have analysed the presence, impact and online footprint that the book has left on the Internet. For this purpose, we have used Google, for being the main information source of any digital user; Wikipedia, as a reference of the universal online encyclopedia; and several online libraries and media sites. Finally, as part of the study of the book's impact, we used direct observation with an analysis of the rating of the book and the reviews of its readers in the main book-selling platforms, at least in Spain, such as Amazon and Casa del Libro, as well as Barnes & Noble in the USA.

The triangulation of the results of these data aims to explain the connection of the hypothesis regarding the research question. As Tellis explains (1997:2):

Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them. This one aspect is a salient point in the characteristic that case studies possess.

Finally, it should be noted that no pre-established coding has been used for the analysis of the content of these data. Instead, an open approximation has been chosen. The results of the analysis were expected to yield a series of conclusions that will link them with the research hypothesis.

5. Results

5.1. *The voices of the scientific establishment towards Menzies*

It is convenient to begin this section by remarking that, although Menzies's claims have received criticism, some expert voices have been to a certain extent receptive to them, such as those of Vargas Martínez (2004) and Dussel (2004). For their part, Lysa and Jianli (2009, p. 297) argue that Menzies's theories are presented in an entertaining and intellectually challenging way, and that it is the reader who will have to decide for himself about the truthfulness of the story. Meanwhile, Steele (2005, p. 276) says that the book can amuse the reader, but always maintaining a healthy degree of scepticism, because it is based on historical facts which are used and mixed at will, resulting in a book that is nothing more than a delicious amusement. Leaving aside two other books that support Menzies's claims (Andro, 2005 and Chiasson, 2006), which scholars have also branded as fiction (Fritze, 2009b, 126), this is in general terms all the praise Menzies has received. Thus, the general rejection from historians who almost unanimously brand his work as pseudohistorical and pseudo-scientific, has led Menzies to vilify them, playing a double game with them.

Among the many scholars mentioned by Menzies in the acknowledgments of his book, which he tries to convert into a source of legitimacy and credibility, are Kirsten and Paul Seaver. Kirsten, a

member of the Royal Geographic Society, in her exhaustive work around the veracity of another of the maps used by Menzies in its argumentation, the map of Vinland (Menzies, 2002, p. 355 and 362), leaves no room for doubt: it is false (Seaver, 2004). Such a map does not come from the 15th century but from the 20th century. Equally false is another map that Menzies presents in 2006 as new evidence for his thesis of the Chinese circumnavigation, a map of the 18th century that is an alleged copy of another one belonging to Zheng He, whose falsehood is clearly remarked by Wade (2007). Kirsten Seaver, by the way, considers herself to be manipulated by Menzies, because he included her in the book's acknowledgements, despite she asked him not to do so (Fritze, 2009b).

From the methodological point of view, the book is branded as a failure, and that is why Fritze (2002), among others, accuses it of being an artefact of pseudoscience and pseudohistory. It should be noted that the prefix "pseudo" does not mean anything but false, bluntly and unreservedly. That is, pseudohistory is a false history, even though it is mixed with pieces of truth. Thus, Menzies takes some contrasted truths of history to construct *alternative facts* of relative plausibility, by combining them and bypassing others (Taboada, 2007). Although he does not have credible evidence, and many of the data he presents "are agglutinated with lightness and little rigour" (Rojas Sandoval, 2004, p. 22), he continuously splashes its book with scientifically reckless and unethical argumentative expressions, such as "there is no doubt that", "there is evidence of", "firm evidence", and "the most plausible explanation" (Taboada, 2007, p. 76). In that sense, Menzies uses the confusion between the possible and the probable. The fact that something is possible, or not impossible, does not mean that it is probable, that is, that there are great opportunities for it to happen or have occurred.

For Elman (2007), who calls Menzies's book a well-orchestrated science-fiction work, his lies are so many and so varied that to disprove them one by one would be a huge effort (Taboada, 2007, p. 762). Goodman (2006, p. 212) agrees and claims that the book has all the elements needed to be "a good contemporary conspiracy", something that is always a good engine for fiction and pseudohistory (Gottschall, 2012). Rivers (2006) is also convincing and argues that the book is a literary licensing exercise that is not revisionist history, but plain fiction, not even science fiction. As JuddStallard (2008) has summarised, the book's many critics coincide in all of these aspects, but Menzies has always opted for some new plot artefact that allows him to dodge all these criticisms.

Fritze (2009b) dedicates a whole chapter of his book *Invented Knowledge* to Menzies. In it, Fritze narrates with details Menzies's mixture of historical truths with fallacies. Starting with the figure of Zheng He, the British author begins with the speculations of how his admirals reached the South American coast and crossed the Strait of Magellan, and how the expedition split in two from there: Hong Bao goes to the South, and Zhou Man to the north, thus reaching all the great regions of the world. Once Menzies and Bonomi, his agent, had the first draft of the book prepared, they undertook a communication campaign to sell it, in the first place, to a prestigious editorial, hiring for this purpose to Midas Public Relations (Fritze, 2009b, p. 122). The publisher that finally bought the rights was Bantam Press, owned by the Transworld Group, a large prestigious publishing house, which increased Menzies' credibility (Fritze, 2009b, p. 122). For the presentation event, they rented a place at the Royal Geographic Society in London, with which they managed, in addition to associating themselves to the name of a prestigious institution, to generate controversy, which always increases notoriety. With the same *modus operandi* they later tried to gain similar publicity at Stanford University, at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association of 2004, held in Washington DC, and even in the Library of Congress (Goodman, 2006, p. 212).

For Fritze (2009b), the book is a kind of hybrid between a historical narrative, a travelogue and a detective story, and nothing else. In spite of the seemingly overwhelming evidence, the book only presents Menzies's speculations and "opinions", contrary to the "criterion" of true historians, who see them not only as "improbable but absurd and completely unfounded on any convincing or credible evidence" (Fritze, 2009b, p. 121). Many specialists have branded Menzies as "incompetent, dishonest or both", even in marine technical issues (Rivers, 2004). Without mentioning anyone, Fernández-Armesto (2010, p. 244) argues that "absurd claims have been made about Zheng He's voyages" and affirms quite emphatically that "the ships of his fleet did not cross the limits of the Indian Ocean nor discovered America or Antarctica" and much less that neither He nor any of his subordinates circumnavigated the world.

For his part, Richardson (2008, p. 37) brands Menzies's work as "invented history". The book, he says, should never be discussed in any history degree programme. In any case, it should be a warning of how easy it is "to be swindled by unscrupulous authors and editors". Likewise, based on the in-depth examination of some of the maps used by Menzies to support his theses (Richardson, 2004; Robison, 2010), he argues that they are not "cartographic evidence", but "imaginography", as Menzies freely "translates" many of the toponyms in an uninformed and unspecific way.

As Goodman (2006) points out, Menzies might have set himself to write an entertaining novel and even to choose the counterfactual genre, which is so fashionable today, building an alternative history under the premise "what would have happened if...?". Evans (2014, p. 13) defines counterfactual history as the "alternative versions of the past in which an alteration in the series of events leads to a different result that actually took place". Even with its shadows, in addition to entertaining, the counterfactual model can have its scientific utility. However, as Evans (2014) states, in the end all counterfactual writers have the tendency to express desires and "settle unfinished business" (Evans, 2014). This is where Menzies does seem to stand coincide. For Taboada (2007) and Rojas Sandoval (2004), there is no doubt that what the British author wants is to replace European heroes with Chinese ones, to pay off the alleged debts that history has with China.

The pages of Menzies's book also exude, in some way, the trap in which counterfactual writers usually fall: "imagining that things would have been better if they had been different" (Evans, 2014, p. 150). Just like counterfactual hypotheses are ironic because they always, ultimately, shed more light on the present than on the past (Evans, 2014), the same could also be said about Menzies. But having said that, the coincidences end here, because the author has opted at all times to defend his work in historiographic terms.

Finlay (2004, p. 242) concludes that the circumnavigation that Menzies poses never took place, and firmly brands the reasoning of the book as inexorably circular, backed up by false evidences, taken out of a derisory research. Unreservedly, Fernández-Armesto (2010) qualifies the book as "the nonsense of a two-year-old". However, in spite of the vilification received from Finlay and other experts almost immediately after its publication, the book was a bestseller, a "paradigm of the success of pseudoscientific literature" (Fritze, 2009b, p. 121), which thanks to a marketing campaign managed to sell more than a million copies in his first five years.

Thus, before the confrontation with the academy, Menzies said: "the public is on my side, and they are the ones who matter" (in Fritze, 2009b, p. 126). Therefore, he appeals to the *authority* of the public, to face the authority that the academic and scientific communities can have. However, when

he gets prestigious universities, such as Harvard, Oxford, Lisbon and Melbourne, to invite him to talk about his book, Menzies interprets this as an endorsement because, according to him, this “doesn’t happen unless professors in those universities think I’m right” (in Fritze, 2009b, p. 125). That does not prevent us from saying that universities do not always agree with their guests, attending to the plurality that must govern in them, but it also involves a touch of attention in relation to the true nature of university scientific neutrality.

In any case, Menzies himself (2002, p. 19) has pointed out that his book is not destined for the academy, but for the “general public”, which suggests that the audacious and “rigorous” “investigation” that he defends in the book’s introduction does not follow the canonical protocols of science. In other words, in all scientific disciplines, in the face of a supposed finding, the first thing to do is to share it with the expert scientific community for its exhaustive and rigorous confrontation. Once the filters that corroborate at least the methodological rigour have been passed, the results are shared with the public opinion, but not before.

5.2. The footprint of 1421

5.2.1. Cataloguing

In relation to the legitimation and dissemination of pseudohistory, Henige (2008) hits the nail in the head: bibliographic cataloguing. The way libraries classify materials related to the past, that is, history, fiction, beliefs, counterfactual narratives, etc., has an impact on the credibility and legitimacy of what has been classified. Thus, it is unfortunate that librarians, one of the world’s main agents in the classification of books, fail in distinguishing between probable facts, palpable fiction and scientifically verified history, leaving users somehow helpless. Or, to put it in another way, cataloging subjects and/or Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) sometimes does not prepare libraries for controversial works like this one.

To this day, some national and international libraries continue to classify Menzies’s work in the categories “Discoveries in Geography—Chinese”, “Voyages around the world”, “China--history--Ming dynasty, 1368-1644” and “America--Discovery and exploration—China”. Thus, most libraries list the book in subjects are dedicated to history, in general, and in particular to Chinese history, “Chinese discoveries” and “History of the World”. Regarding UDC classification, on some occasions, the book is listed in 355.49: "Naval history. Naval campaigns. Naval battles "and 94. "General history ". Other libraries include the book in 910: "Generalities. Geography as a science. Explorations Travels".

If we turn to Amazon.com, the referent in e-book selling platforms, we observe that the work is catalogued, again, in the American and Spanish stores, under the subject of “History”. More specifically, in Spain, it is located under the category History/Middle Ages, while Amazon.com places it in History/Asia/China, History/World /Expeditions and Discoveries and History/Military/Naval.

On the contrary, perhaps the most accurate analysis and cataloguing is carried out by Wikipedia. First of all, the website does not dedicate a single page to the book in its English or Spanish versions, although the Spanish version includes the entry “Hipótesis de 1421”, listed in the category “Pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts” and “Pseudohistory”. Gavin Menzies’s entry in the English version appears in the category “Pseudohistorians”, but also in the category “Pre-Columbian trans-

oceanic contact”. In any of the cases, there is no reference to the author or his books under the subjects or categories “circumnavigation”, “Exploration of the Pacific Ocean” or “Era of discoveries”, unlike the entry dedicated to the “Magellan-Elcano expedition”. In the Spanish version, the author’s entry does not even exist.

5.2.2. Presence and impact on the Internet

In quantitative terms, the book’s footprint on the internet is not overly extensive. Following with Wikipedia, the supposed Chinese circumnavigation of the world is not referenced in any way in the entry on “circumnavigation” on the English and Spanish versions. The annex titled “List of Circumnavigations” does not include the book, Zheng He nor the admirals Yang Qing, Zhou Man, Hong Bao or Zhou Wen. In addition, the English entry on Gavin Menzies, in the section “Talk”, mostly rejects the possibility of writing an article about his works due to their pseudohistory status. In the Spanish edition, in the same section, it is established that any reference to the work of Menzies must be placed under the aforementioned entry: “Hipótesis de 1421”.

Meanwhile, Google’s search results for “First circumnavigation of the world” do not include any information that links this with China. The same happens when we search for “Chinese voyage around the Earth” or “first Chinese round about the world.” The results only begin to include Menzies’s history when one adds the keyword “Zheng”. In these cases, there are several websites that do collect the supposed circumnavigation of the world completed by the Chinese fleet. In YouTube the results are similar. When including “Zheng” to the previous keyword combinations the results include three videos: “The Chinese fleet mysterious voyages of Admiral Zheng He in the 15th Century” (1928 views), posted by the channel History; another video with the same title and 237,092 views; and a third one, titled “Did China discover America? The voyages of Zheng He”, which has 20,533 views.

5.2.3. Presence in Spanish media

Practically all of the Spanish press, at one time or another, have talked about the existence of Menzies’s book. Thus, for this analysis, we carried out a search in the MyNews database, which collects 1444 Spanish journalistic media outlets since 1996 and more than 250 million articles. Two searches were carried out: in the first one, the keyword combination was “vuelta + mundo + China + Zheng”, from 1 January 2004 to 22 March 2019, in all media. In general, little coverage is observed in the media. Of all the results, and once filtered by theme, eight relevant news articles were identified in newspapers such as *La Vanguardia*, *Diario de Navarra*, *El Heraldo de Aragón*, *Abc*, *Eldiario.es* and *La Verdad*. All the news stories focused on the hypothesis that Zheng He discovered America before Columbus did. In addition, the articles were written, in the majority of cases, in response to several key events in China, such as the aforementioned sixth centenary of Zheng He’s voyages, China’s new silk route and the statements made by Turkish President Erdogan on Muslim navigation.

As far as the news genre is concerned, there are news and opinion articles. Most texts specify they are “conjectures”, “hypotheses” or “speculation” when they refer to the supposed discovery of America by Zheng He. For example, one article points out: “this is another attempt to stretch history

to favour the cultural and economic expansion of a country” (*La Verdad*, 18/11/2014). On the other hand, other headlines grant an important role to Zheng He, “The Odyssey of the Chinese Columbus” (*Abc*, 14/08/2005), and give room to the theories and conjectures more openly. It is important to note an article of the Europa Press Agency (11/10/2016), which explicitly considers valid the thesis of the Chinese round about the world.

In the second search, the keyword combination was “China + Menzies + Zheng”, to assess the news coverage of Menzies and his book. A total of 49 results were identified in Spanish newspapers. In general terms, the news coverage focused, again, on the presentation of the world map, the silk road, and the centenary of Zheng He’s voyages. Some news media described Gavin Menzies’s book as “interesting” (*El Mundo*, 27/01/2005, *La Verdad*, 16/01/2006). This search yielded a new topic: the exhibition of Zheng He’s voyages at the Maritime Museum of Barcelona.

In any case, most media outlets treat Menzies’s work as mere speculation. For example, *La Vanguardia* (17/01/2006) in an article in the culture section points out that history is made with evidence and factual documents, “and, for the moment, there is no evidence of his arrival in America, although the thesis of the British author has pleased many hearts in China”. Likewise, with regards to the exhibition in Barcelona, *El Periódico* (14/11/2008) presents an interview with a sinologist from the Pompeu Fabra University to refute the debate: “Africa yes, America not” is the headline of the article. Leaving aside this case, the rest of the media do not usually incorporate researchers or historians into their columns as interviewees. Besides all this, Menzies himself has an interview on *ABC* (5/04/2009), titled “Leonardo da Vinci was a great artist, but he did not invent anything”, to talk about Menzies’s second book and the links between Zheng He and European Renaissance.

In both searches, Zheng He’s admirals have little presence in the press, with the exception of an article published in *XL Semanal*, titled “Did the Chinese discover America in 1421?”, which quotes admirals Yang Qing, Zhou Man, Hong Bao and Zhou Wen.

5.2.4. Direct observation. Users’ ratings

In addition to the previous sources, the study aimed to visit the main websites that sell the book and observe directly the opinion of users and readers. On Amazon.com, the book has 525 reviews and a global average rating of 4.1 out of 5 stars. In other words, most readers and users value the work very positively, emphasising, among many other aspects, its good prose, “the detective-like work on the maps”, its “good arguments”. Here it is important to remember what we said before about the niche market, which is always open to all kinds of stories. The book only has 19% of comments with 1 star and 6% with two stars. Importantly, all these comments use the terms “pseudohistory”, “implausible” or “not very scientific” to describe the book.

In Amazon.es the book has 10 reviews and an excellent average rating: 4.5 out of 5 stars. The only critical rating, with 3 stars, states that it is “An entertaining book, but with very little historical rigour. The author’s conclusions are excessively voluntarist and despite it deals with proven historical facts it is a science fiction book”. In *La Casa del Libro*, the book has received an average rating of 8 out of 10 and only one negative comment. Finally, in Barnes & Noble, one of the most popular book stores in the USA, the book has received an average score of 3.7 out of 5 from the 77 users who rated it.

6. Conclusions

As we can see, the Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation of the world is not safe from post-truth politics. The first circumnavigation of the globe, Paine (2013, p. 376) highlights, is not only one of the feats of that era, but of any era. With this and the rest of those European expeditions, humans became aware that they live in the same single world, which allowed them to recognise “all peoples as members of a single moral community of planetary magnitude” (Fernández-Armesto, 2010, p. 12). Both Iberian countries, therefore, began the process of globalisation (González Sánchez, 2007) in which we remain immersed today. Likewise, the feat revealed the importance of leaving written evidence of everything that happens, as Varona-Aramburu and Herrero-Diz point out (2018), because history constitutes that true account of the past of man, based on evidence gathered under the scientific method. Everything else will be fake history or junk history, precisely like that of the Chinese fleets (Thompson, 2008).

Below, and based on the previous results, we aim to explain how and why Gavin Menzies’s story of the first voyage around the world is disseminated and legitimised, based on the dispersion of information and the construction of post-truth. Thus, first, it is observed that, in general terms, the criticism received by the book from the academic and scientific community almost unanimously brands it as pseudohistory or pseudoscience. Although in principle one might think that this is a harmless case and that it is a phenomenon with a limited transcendence, at least for now, it is advisable to repair the risks that, like any unscientific historical revisionism, it can entail. As Fritze points out (2009b, p. 16), “pseudohistory often lends itself as a tool of racism, religious fanaticism and nationalist extremism”. Or as Baggini (2018, p. 77) warns, “false facts can lead us to sustain a flawed ethic”, hence pseudoscientific revisionism, in addition to being a great business, can suppose at any moment a spark for other problems. Especially today, when there seems to be a growing contempt for experience, knowledge and truth (Kakutami, 2018; D’Ancona, 2017).

The work of Menzies, as we have seen, enjoys a very positive cataloguing in the most prestigious libraries, being located in sections linked to history and with little review or mention of the concepts of fake history or junk history. In this way, the historiographic rejection does not seem to present in the scope of documentation, which continues collecting the work in a non-critical way. Only the online encyclopedia Wikipedia seems to break this naïve objectivity in cataloguing and takes advantage of its collective intelligence project that is self-correcting and self-critic. The work of Menzies, in this way, leaves no traces in this online reference and when it does it is always catalogued under the “Pseudohistory” category, rejecting any construction of historical truth that does not follow a widely recognised scientific method. Google also seems to filter quite well the pseudohistory of the story, as it does not offer results on the Chinese voyage around the world and privileging results that lead towards the Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation of the world. On the contrary, printed media, as well as Amazon, do make space for Menzies’s story. In the case of the online shopping platform, the issue is aggravated by the ratings of users who value the work very positively, which contributes to the book’s position in the rankings and subjects related to history and China.

Certainly, as it happens with other cases of post-truth, this work runs the risk of favouring Menzies, as more than one reader will know him after reading these pages. That is the paradox of the fight against fake history and fakes news. As Lakoff (2010) claims, the verification of falsehoods is

sometimes counterproductive. De Keersmaecker and Roets (2017) argue that even in optimal circumstances, the initial influence of erroneous information cannot be undone simply by stating that such information is incorrect. Thus, a possible solution is the so-called “sandwich truth” (Lakoff, 2010), that is, to start by framing the discussion in truth, and then explaining the post-truth, to finally close the discussion with truth. As Ball (2017) points out, even the most obvious nonsense can be made up in minutes and proving its falsehood will require much more time and effort. Researchers must be prepared to live and coexist inexorably with it.

When conspiracy theories, often linked to pseudohistory, become ingrained, they do so strongly (Gottschall, 2012), while rational and empirical arguments against them may not be enough (Melleuish, Sheiko & Brown, 2009). The stories that fascinate people the most include those that narrate a good conflict, an arduous struggle between protagonists and antagonists. Thus, the starting point of the pseudohistorical story in general is the outlawed author and/or protagonist who faces the conspiracy of the establishment, and in the case of Menzies, in parallel with the alleged Chinese proscription from historiography. It is the quixotic archetype that repeats itself over and over again. Perhaps that is why we are facing an industry that handles so much money (Fritze 2009b).

For all this, it is advisable to remember the need to teach and disseminate history in a rigorous way, exercising both critical thinking and ethical values (Corones, 2009; Lazer et al., 2018). This should also be done in an attractive and seductive way, at least as much as pseudoscience, disruptive narratives and conspiracy theories do, as they are always so suggestive for a good portion of the public, which is now growing thanks to the digital ecosystem. Thus, if post-truth is an emotional phenomenon, the counterattack must also be “emotionally intelligent, in addition to rigorously rational” (D’Ancona, 2017, p. 150).

As González Sánchez (2007 p. 74) points out, the Renaissance represented “the triumph of the symbiosis of experience and reasoning”. Five hundred years later, the diagnosis of Fernández-Armesto (1997) is clear. The truth and common sense that emerged from this symbiosis are in the midst of a cultural war between two extremisms: fundamentalism and nihilism. Nonetheless, the search for the truth must continue, leaving both extremists on the margins of history. However, the digital cosmos has diluted the margins and borders between centre and periphery, and between official and marginal, opinion and facts, experts and laymen (D’Ancona, 2017; Kakutami, 2018).

Menzies (2002 p. 467) ends up saying that his story “is just beginning”. We have already seen how far it has gone in its first years of life. Now that we are celebrating the fifth centenary of the true first voyage around the world, Menzies’s book is circumscribed to a mere and sad historiographic anecdote, whose only pedagogical value should be to be an example of how not to (re)write history (Finlay, 2004) and how not to renounce the rigorous search for the truth. Embracing for the first time the world in its complete roundness, Magellan and Elcano expanded to the limits our horizons, among which the search for the truth should never stop. Getting by without it would mean renouncing to the essence of our species.

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How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

JA Muñoz-Velázquez and J Lozano Delmar (2019): "The fake first round about the Earth. The case of the supposed Chinese circumnavigation of 1421 from the post-truth paradigm". *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 950 to 968.
<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1366/49en.html>
DOI: 10.4185/RLCS-2019-1366en

Paper received on 2 September. Accepted on 10 May.

Published on 18 May.