I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE TRUTH, TELL ME A GOOD STORY: NARRATIVITY AS DISCOURSE, CREDIBILITY AS CONDITION

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Abstract

The advent of the 21st century has brought with it a more complex and contradictory society. The progressive integration of consumer society, mass media, technological innovations in the field of communications, internet and social media has created an extremely visual and hyper-narrative society that can be framed as the *storytelling* society in the American-driven West. This hyper-narrativity has degenerated into what has been termed "infodemic" or informative pandemic, merged with older concepts like fake news, conspiracy theory and post-truth. I suggest, as filter of or counterpower to this hyper-narrativity, the concept of "credibility." Departing from Niklas Luhmann's "trust-confidence" theory, the "credibility" theory reflects our "liquid" 21st-century society—in which modernist concepts like "truth," "fake," "false" and "veracity" have loosened their meanings—by proposing a "credibility factor" that is closely related to the experience of the receiver and defined by its relationship to the sender through the mass and social media sphere.

1. Introduction

We live in a fascinating era. Albeit all the contradictions, complexities, confrontations, convulsions and conflagrations that raze our here-and-now, it's difficult not to wonder at such magnificent spectacle. How would one ever imagine that a person sidled out of a reality show like Donald Trump would ever become president of the United States? Or that right wing factions, instigated by the same Trump, would assault the Senate of the United States? Regardless, nobody like Trump to embody today's *Zeitgeist*! He is just another example, right, but highly iconic of this out-of-control and exacerbated narrativity that characterizes today's society, whose origins take us back to another notable actor: Ronald Reagan. From Ronald to Donald, from Reagan to Trump, two characters that have a lot in common. The temporal frame of 1980-2021 allows us to codify this new narrativity in the West called *storytelling*.

Men and women are narrative animals par excellence, a *femina* or *homo narrans*. Let's recall that for anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss narrative constitutes the basic and constant human expression, independently of its ethnic origin, primary language and acculturation.[1] For the semiotician Roland Barthes narrative is present in each media or discipline, from the myth and epic to the legend, fable, painting, film and comics. More precisely, Barthes argues a people without narrative would be unimaginable as "narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural."[2]

The question that we could ask ourselves now is: What happens when a citizen feels annoyed or helpless because the quotidian narrative s/he must face debunks his future expectations or collides with her/his beliefs?

The answer to such a question is easy: we simply change the narrative.

And this is precisely my hypothesis when articulating the advent of this new narrativity in the '80s with the ascent of Ronald Reagan to power, which has been framed by Christian Salmon as *storytelling*.[3] (From now on I will use *storytelling* in cursive whenever I'm referring to today's western hyper-narrativity.) Since then, narrativity could only grow stronger, permeating all fields of society: from the bureaucracy and the government to the economy, advertising, religion, psychology, ideology, politics, mass and social media.

2. The Narrative Turn: From Metahistory to Storytelling

In order to understand how we arrived here it is of great use to us to take as departing point the intriguing concept "metahistory" developed by North American historian Hayden White in 1973 in his book *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*.[4] In it he poses the transgressive hypothesis that history differs not that much from fiction as both are highly narrative poetical exercises. In other words: the narrative form determines the historical content. And narrating, as we all know very well, means selecting, ordering and interpreting, decisions pervaded by a profound ideological character.

Hayden White does not so much appeal to the fact that the historian works with fake or imaginary events, but to the fact that historical thinking recurs equally to narrative strategies to confer sense to the narration and its narrative worlds. Also, Michel de Certeau and Karl R. Popper, like White, insisted in pointing out this fine and unstable line that mediates history and fiction.[5]

The concept "metahistory" prepares in a natural way the road to today's *storytelling*.

This new sense of history in the West, that brought about a narrative or "narrativist" turn of the present in the form of the so-called *storytelling*, has its roots in the arrival of Ronald Reagan and his *spin doctors* to the White House in the year 1983.[6] It's *the-actor-turned-president* who inaugurates in the '80s the *storytelling* or hyper-narrativity era: A new way of relating to the citizen through attractive and powerful narratives that pervade all spheres of society by substituting, adorning, deforming or even camouflaging inconvenient or directly vile realities.[7]

The American Dream was broken. Let's recall that there was a severe crisis of confidence in the future in American society in mid and late 1970s that, according to Russell D. Buhite, threatened to "destroy the social and the political fabric of America."[8] The excesses of the military in Vietnam and the failure of putting a halt to communist expansion in the world, the Watergate affair, the oil crisis in 1973 and the subsequent oil embargoes and, especially, the fiasco

of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 projected all together a tremendously vulnerable image of the American empire.[9]

Now, against Carter's pessimistic and defeatist narrative, Reagan or *the Great Communicator* offered, according to Robert M. Collins, a "profoundly optimistic vision of American renewal" in which he promised to "revitalize the economy, restore U.S. power and prestige in world affairs, and reverse what he saw as the dangerous drift in the direction of a European welfare state."[10] And how does Reagan succeed in imposing his narrative when the obstinate reality was adverse?

As John Anthony Maltese keenly pointed out in his best-seller *Spin Control. The White House Office of Communications and the Management of Presidential News*, under Reagan's mandate the Office of Communications and Information "contributed to the formation of a counter-reality. The idea was to divert people's attention away from substantive issues by creating a world of myths and symbols that made people feel good about themselves and their country."[11] As such, the White House during Reagan's era does not allow the media to dictate the information flow but goes on the attack with the *line of the day* or *story of the day*: messages or stories carefully crafted, very often supported by moving images, that imposed a script and determined the perspective of how the news had to be framed or transmitted.

Picture 1: President Ronald Reagan addresses the Nation from the oval office on National Security (SDI Speech) 23.3.1983

And this is what has been happening during almost four decades from the moment Ronald Reagan arrived at the White House to the election of the equally telegenic Donald Trump. A time span during which this extraordinary narrative machine has spun no less extraordinary narratives, like "Star Wars," "The Empire of Evil" or "War on Terror." In other words: the power of the narrative enhanced the narrative of power!

Christian Salmon puts forward the following pertinent question: "How do we explain this *storytelling* influence on the political discourses in the United States? Why is the narration of edifying stories considered there a new paradigm in political sciences at the very expense of the notions of images and rhetoric to the point that it dominates not only electoral campaigns but also the exercise of the executive power or the management of crisis situations?"[12]

Since Reagan and his spin doctors, politics haven't ceased to be a media spectacle in which the president plays the role of main actor and in which *storytelling* defines the limits between reality and fiction. Ronald Reagan's counter-realities convinced first the American people and later the whole world that it didn't matter whether something was true or false, what really mattered was the narrative and the prettier and more credible, the better.

Our western *storytelling* society is, as we will see, made of different levels of counter-narratives that hover between that which is possible and that which is fake.

3. Classical and Modern Precedents: Honor, *Ethos*, Charisma and Trust-Confidence

Before we embark in the formulation of a communications theory, it's very useful to investigate the classical or pre-modern precedents of the "credibility" concept in order to locate its theoretical articulation from a *longue durée* perspective. And while the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* comes immediately to our minds, we're convinced that a close look at Homer's epic poem *Iliad* will be of great use to us, not only because it anticipates by some four hundred years Aristotle's very elaboration of "character" as a determining factor of humankind, but also because it enables us to frame another complementary element like "honor." Todd S. Frobish argues that Aristotle had to forcibly take inspiration from *Iliad* for the development of his own concept.[13] This is logical because, as George Kennedy reminds us, the "Homeric poems, after being written down in the seventh century B.C., became the textbooks out of which Greek students learned to read and were venerated as the bibles of the culture, the attitude toward speech in the *Iliad* strongly influenced the conception of the orator in Greco-Roman civilization."[14] Basically, *Iliad* is the story of Achilles and his quarrel with King Agamemnon. Because of the slave Briseis he is compelled to give up, Achilles feels his honor has been publicly affronted and the poem narrates his inaction or lack of action to put an end to the war. What is decisive in *Iliad*, according to Frobish, is the fact that the concept of "character" is inevitably linked to the idea of action.[15] "For Homer's men,

their identities were forged through action, not speech, and were usually displayed on the battlefield [...] a man simply was as he acted—his identity or character was strengthened through heroic deed or ruined by some act of cowardice."[16] In other words: a man's character was forged through his behavior on the battlefield. After all, epic poems like *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and myths and legends are populated by gods, demigods and heroes.[17]

Aristotle elaborates on this dilemma in depth through the concept of *ethos*, both in his *Rhetoric* as well as in *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Ethos* (character) is together with *pathos* (emotion) and *logos* (discourse) one of the three parts of rhetoric's persuasion that conform the image the orator projects through his discourse by means of qualities or moral virtues that establish a certain level of confidence among the audience. In other words: *ethos* understood as the speaker's credibility or ability to be believable. For Aristotle "character" or mood is acquired through habit, through elections of moral order that channel men towards a life of virtue. Those virtues are, according to Aristotle, manifested in "justice, courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, practical and speculative wisdom."[18] For Aristotle calls "habits those moral states which form a man's character in life; for not all habits do this. If than anyone uses the language appropriate to each habit, he will represent character."[19]

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle reminds us once more that morality "is the result of habit or custom" and that "the virtues, then, come neither by nature nor against nature, but nature gives the capacity for acquiring them, and is developed by training."[20] In short: what Aristotle suggests is that the orator with character not only possesses *ethos* but he also projects it in a way that the audience perceives it clearly. And that character is formed basically through the habit of a virtuous life.

At this point, two questions come up with respect to the Aristotelian *ethos*: To what extent does the public determine the orator's *ethos*? And has our *storytelling* era displaced *ethos* towards *pathos* and *logos*?

If for honor we resort to Homer and for *ethos* to Aristotle, the theorization of "charisma" falls exclusively on the shoulders of German sociologist Max Weber, although Homer's poem is already impregnated with indirect allusions to this *kharisma* in the form of "favor, grace or divine gift."[21]

Max Weber develops the concept of "charisma" in depth in his book *Economy and Society*, originally published in German in the year 1922, where he addresses the different types of legitimate domination that rule society. Weber explains that the "concept of 'charisma' (grace) has been borrowed from primitive Christian terminology" whose use has been attributed to the German ecclesiastical jurist and theologian Rudolf Sohm, who coined the term in his work *Kirchenrecht* (Ecclesiastical Law), published posthumously in 1923.[22]

For Weber there are three types of legitimate domination. The first type has a *rational-bureaucratic* nature: that which proceeds from the established order and legal authority. The second type is *traditional-patriarchal*: its power rests on sanctity and authority derived from ancestral traditions. And, in third place, we deal with the power of a *charismatic-individualistic* character: that which emanates from the extraordinary sanctity, heroism or exemplariness of one sole person or his call or charismatic authority.[23] Weber defines charisma as a "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."[24] Finally, Weber also insists in pointing out that in moments of crisis charisma is a big "revolutionary" force capable of overthrowing entire bureaucracies or hereditary regimes because of its power for renovation of the established order.[25]

The advent of liberal democracies and political parties in a way regains this very idea of heroic or shamanic charisma by investing the leader with the formation's charismatic authority.[26] Notwithstanding, this would be more of a nature of "personal charisma" or "secular charisma" and not something extraordinary or supernatural, which would fit neatly with the progressive widespread of mass media along the 20th century.[27] According to Sam Whimster, "today any leader is liable to be portrayed 'charismatic'" with the support of mass media and social media.[28] The contemporary politician, he continues, only needs to be "photogenic" and have a "likeable personality."[29] In this same sense, Vincent Lloyd and Dana Lloyd nuance that the epithet charismatic has suffered a very warholian trivialization as it even applies to "celebrities, lawyers, politicians, and new age gurus."[30]

The second concept that is particularly of interest to us is "trust-confidence" elaborated by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in 1968. Luhmann's perspective is the seamless continuation to Weber's "charisma". Although the complexity and contradiction of the information society is today much more exacerbated, artificial and dominant than in the '60s, the *luhmannian* notion is extremely suitable when developing our own "credibility" concept as "media confidence." Etymologically speaking, confidence stems from Latin *fides*: it relies on faith (the imaginary), looks towards the future and implies a certain kind of familiarity. Within the trust-confidence theory, Niklas Luhmann establishes a difference between *trust* understood as confidence in people (simple, individual and small scale) and *confidence* applied to systems (complex, impersonal and abstract) like the economy, politics or government.

Luhmann defines his point of departure in a very basic way: "We put our trust in the self-evident matter-of-fact 'nature' of the world and of human nature every day."[31] And some years later he would summarize it even more explicitly: "Trust remains vital in interpersonal relations, but participation in functional systems like the economy or politics is no longer a matter of

personal relations. It requires confidence, but not trust."[32] And what happens to this "systemic confidence" when an exceptional situation like COVID-19 befalls? In the same essay Luhmann addresses the expectations with respect to contingent events arguing that we have to "neglect the possibility of disappointment. You neglect this because it is a very rare possibility [as is the COVID-19 situation], but also because you do not know what else to do. The alternative is to live in a state of permanent uncertainty and to withdraw expectations without having anything with which to replace them."[33] Still today these words acquire a lot of meaning given the instability and fragility of our social realities.

The high degree of complexity in today's world has exceeded by far the limits of personal trust and systemic confidence. We should not forget that Luhmann already insisted on the new risks that mass media with its language and symbols produced through narratives that, while having a big impact on people, not necessarily were told from a proper perspective.[34]

We will see how the "credibility theory" seeks to reduce the complexity of social communication in mass media and social media.

4. Plausible and Toxic Narratives in Today's Society: From Counterfactuals to Conspiracy Theories and Infodemics

"Strictly speaking," argue Denis J. Hilton, David R. Mandel and Patrizia Catellani, "counterfactuals refer to thoughts or statements that include at least some premises believed to be contrary to fact."[35] For their part, Barbara A. Spellman, Alexandra P. Kincannon and Stephen J. Stose nuance that among human beings' multiple cognitive capacities "counterfactual reasoning allows us to imagine something in the world being other than it actually was or is (i.e., counter-to-fact); we can then imagine, or mentally simulate, the world continuing to unfold in a direction other than the direction it has actually taken."[36] That said, in all spheres of society, from the scientific and the legal to the economic, the political or the literary, reality goes hand in hand to counter-reality: the discovery of causal relationships very often goes preceded by counter-factual reasoning.

A fascinating counterfactual hypothesis is related to Hitler and would try to answer the question: What would have happened if Hitler had passed the entry exam to the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 1908? We know that he tried a second time to enter the academy by presenting four watercolors which, to his great frustration, were rejected because they presented serious perspective errors.[37]

Another equally fascinating example closer in time is what was colloquially called *Star Wars*. President Reagan launched, during his presidential inauguration speech held on 23 March 1983, the *Strategic Defense Initiative* (SDI) or "Star Wars" in allusion to the famous George Lucas movie. It was the scientist Edward Teller, father of the nuclear bomb, who came

up with the SDI project that would supposedly turn nuclear missiles totally obsolete.[38] Robert McFarlane, National Security advisor between 1983 and 1985, said it bluntly: "SDI was the major hoax operation in history."[39] It constitutes without doubt a fantastic counterfactual narrative that acquired the potential to become reality and that had very practical effects on reality itself: given the possibility of a new and economically expensive arms race Russia abandoned and accepted negotiations for the dismantling of nuclear warheads.

In February 1989 Francis Fukuyama gave a lecture at the University of Chicago advancing his positive idea about "the end of history" and the consecration of liberal democracy in the world. In the year 1992, Francis Fukuyama finally published his iconic book *The End of History and the Last Man*. In the meantime, we know that the essay would turn into one of the most read and his book one of the most criticized in the long history of political philosophy.[40] Besides arguing that history would come to an end, Fukuyama also predicted that mankind would die of boredom. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy would be "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and "the end of history as such."[41]

The message was powerful: Capitalism had defeated communism and liberal democracy would impose herself on a global scale. To make matters better, the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, hardly eight months after Fukuyama's initial speech, ultimately served to endorse his daring thesis.

In any case, Francis Fukuyama's "the end of history" became a very powerful and above all legitimizing narrative that equipped neo-liberalism with a though-provoking philosophical facet in line with the best *storytelling*. Michael S. Roth remarked conveniently that "the fantasy of the end of history allows one to imagine that the real and the ideal will coincide in the world."[42]

President John F. Kennedy's death was announced on 22 November 1963 at exactly 1:38 p.m. Lee Harvey Oswald was accused of the assassination. On 9 August 117 Publius Aelius Hadrianus—better known as Hadrian—received in Syria a letter announcing the sumptuous news that he had been adopted by emperor Trajan. Only two days later Trajan died in Selinus, a port-town on the west coast of ancient Cilicia. Soon rumors spread of a possible poisoning.[43]

These two temporal poles allow us to articulate this fascinating narrative phenomenon: *conspiracy* versus *conspiracy theory*.

We have, on the one hand, the historical Mediterranean roots with special emphasis on the Roman Empire where, according to Victoria Emma Pagán, conspiracies were part of the political and social life of the elites, senators, historians, playwrights and poets. In other words, conspiracy configures part of the rhetoric culture of ancient Rome. Pagán adds: "Conspiracy theory is a kind of story telling that makes claims to credibility and truth."[44]

The other big contemporary block would have its origins in North American post-war society and the Cold War psychosis. According to Timothy Melley, quoted by Pagán, we're dealing with a phenomenon driven by "a sense of political disaffection and individual autonomy in decline."[45] In particular, the terrible and unprecedented assassination of John F. Kennedy generates a maelstrom of *conspiracy theories*. According to Brian Keely a conspiracy theory constitutes a "proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of people—the conspirers—acting in secret." [46] It basically proposes the reasons a certain event happened.

The big attention to conspiracy theories during the post-war goes back, on the one hand, to Karl R. Popper's use of the concept "the conspiracy theory of society"[47] and on the other, to Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Published on November 1964 in *Harper's Magazine*, this iconic essay would contribute to its widespread use. In it, Hofstadter explored the paranoid style that according to him characterized American Cold War politics and denounced "the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant."[48]
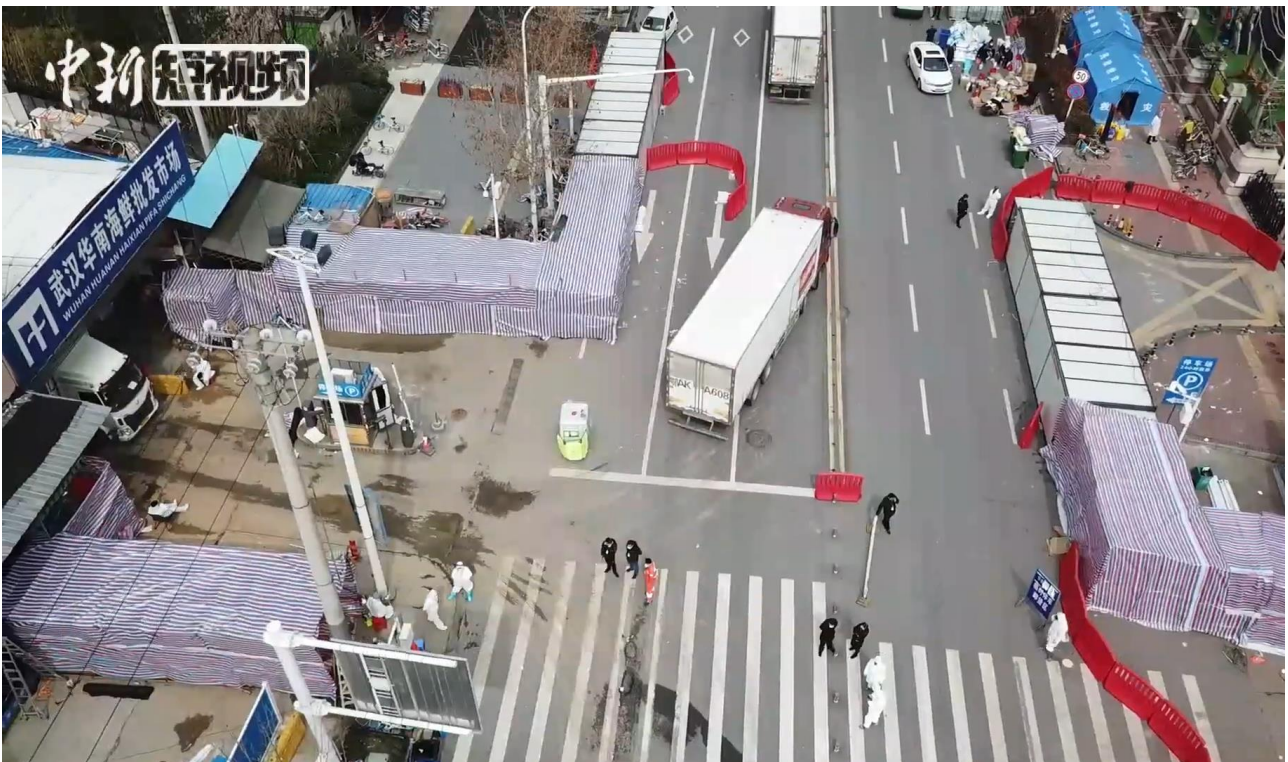
Picture 2: Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

There is a widespread societal disapproval of the allusion to conspiracy theories as anyone who dares to mention the term, from layman to lawyer, will be met with derision, ridiculed or frowned upon. And yet, conspiracy theories are frequently—if we are to believe Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski— "articulations of and distorted responses to existing problems, needs,

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and anxieties. Thus, they must not be dismissed out of hand and ridiculed but have to be taken seriously."[49] Like with COVID-19, people try to look for an explanation to what is happening and, even more so, to find someone to blame for the difficult situation there are in. And for some citizens certain conspiracy theories are music to their ears as they provide the perfect scapegoat to blame for their bad luck. In today's society, and in particular after the arrival of internet and social media, it looks as if we live in the golden era of conspiracy theories.

There is unanimity among theorists and scholars that the year 2016 is the year of the advent of post-truth and fake news: Trump and Brexit were responsible for the alarming increase in manipulation and hoaxes, both in mass media and social media, achieving levels heretofore unknown.[50] In addition, this date would acquire historical meaning as the Oxford Dictionary would declare "post-truth" the word of the year.

For their part, so-called fake news became a relevant element of this epistemically post-truth regime. In this case, the Cambridge Dictionary provides one of the better definitions when it affirms that fake news are "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke."[51] According to Dan Evon, one of the most successful fake news happened precisely in 2016 when the news website *WTOE 5 News* announced that His Holiness Pope Francis had endorsed Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.[52] It was of course a joke that went viral, yet many news outlets around the world were giving credibility to this unprecedented endorsement.

The actual state of hoaxes and conspiracy theories that COVID-19 brought about are to a certain extent heir to these postmodern disquisitions and have resulted in the so-called "infodemic" or "informative pandemic." According to Roy Schulman and David Siman-Tov, referencing a report of the World Heath Organization (WHO), "the pandemic was accompanied by an 'infodemic' that could threaten public health."[53] The term "infodemic" was coined in 2004 by Francesco Frangialli, the director of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) on the occasion of the SARS and Zika outbreak: "Many tourism officials in Asia are now saying their SARS crisis last year [2004] was not an epidemic at all but an infodemic."[54] This unprecedented and colossal mix of dis-information and over-information that COVID-19 unleashed on a global scale forced the very WHO to hold a scientic conference to fight false cures and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus or the rumor about the control that the elites want to impose on the population through massive vaccination. The *1st WHO Infodemiology Conference* was held between 30 June and 16 July 2020.[55] The challenge was clearly stated by the WHO Head of COVID-19 for Europe David Nabarro, "We need to understand the form in which people tackle problems departing from their own perceptions, while we try to reach them in a way they can truly understand."[56]

The question we should ask ourselves now is: Do we have to throw up our hands in horror due to these widespread post-truths and fake news? The "lie expert" Spanish philosopher Miguel Catalán explains in his *Seudología* (Pseudology) that (self-)deception and lying are part of the very essence of humankind since its pristine beginning: the dissonance between our absurd expectations and reality forces us to a constant exercise of psychic compensation. And this chain of small and big lies that we say to ourselves on a daily basis is what ultimately grants us psychological and moral balance against an ever-diminishing reality and an ever-increasing ambition.[57]

9/11 was the illustrative case par excellence of this kind of infodemia fuelled by conspiracy theories, fake news, post-truths and counterfactuals that only an event of this magnitude would be able to arouse. *9/11* then and COVID-19 now certify once again this "'new narrative order' that presides the formatting of desires and the propagation of emotions," as Christian Salmon has rightly summarized. [58]

5. Credibility: A Communications Theory for the 21st Century

We will now propose the concept "credibility" as condition or filter for today's hyper-narrativity. We laid out a historical perspective of the different elements—honor, *ethos*, charisma and trust-cofindence—that have marked the process of individuation of the subject in the West. By doing so we have enabled ourselves to articulate our own concept of "credibility" as base or pillar for our actual hyper-narrative society. In order to contextualize the pre-modern concept of honor we resorted to Homer's *Illiad*, which in turn anticipated Aristotle's own concept of *ethos*; for the concepts of charisma and trust-confidence, we resorted to Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann, respectively.

This set of historical concepts enabled us to elaborate our own concept of "credibility" as "media confidence" amidst this chaos of narrative discourses. We suggest that "credibility" constitutes a contract of mutual consent between the sender and the receiver that can be broken at any time in a world based on subjective social constructions: people tend to believe what they want to believe at any moment according to their values and predispositions. And when they understand that the sender or the message is no longer credible, they search for a new narrative in which to believe in. As such, this communications theory proposes the liquid or intangible concept of "credibility" as a condition for society's *storytelling* regime, where solid concepts like truth, lie, veracity or falsehood are being permanently challenged.

The sort of narrative imperialism that the citizen is subjected to constructs stories that end up being interiorized by the spectator, even in those cases where what one understands by reality (or conforms the sense of it) has been totally alienated. The fictionalization of the real stood naked before the eyes of the international community when the United Nations officials desperately

looked for arsenals of weapons of mass-destruction in Iraq (later the dispute would end in the 2003 Gulf War). It is therefore hardly surprising as the officials were pursuing a story, a plot.

The concepts of honor, *ethos*, charisma and trust-confidence, which have imbued our hypothesis with a historical perspective, are 'solid' concepts that pertain to traditional 'solid' (pre)modernist structures, institutions and social forms. But today, paraphrasing late Zygmunt Bauman's terminology, belongs to "liquid times", *id est*, the transition of those same structures, institutions and social forms from "the 'solid' to the 'liquid' phase of modernity" in which they become 'liquid' because "they can no longer keep their shape for long" and "cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation."[59]

Even if the concept hasn't been used until today in an explicit theoretically defined context, we all sense in a natural way which is the material environment for the liquid term "credibility": consumer society, mass media and social media. With the perfectioning of marketing and mail order in the United States since the Second World War, the term "credibility" gained recognition in the field, according to Philip Kotler.[60] With the advent of Internet, web sales took over sales via traditional mail order and with the massive multiplying effect came fraud. Because of this insecurity, the University of Stanford developed in the year 2002 the *Web Credibility Research* project under the supervision of Brian Jeffrey Fogg: ten performance points that allow evaluation of the veracity of information offered, for example, by a vendor, a brand or a company online and that should be correct, trustworthy, updated and verifiable.[61]

The special fields of interest for our investigation are the mass and social media, as the notion of "credibility" is the appropriate tool for control and quality. It doesn't matter if it's former President Trump proclaiming the invasion of North Korea or Bill Gates announcing the last vaccine against COVID-19, all of them depend on inspiring, attractive, and above all, credible representations. In other words: that the citizen on the receiver end confers credibility to what he hears from the sender.

The "credibility factor" is determined by the personal experience of the receiver. Credibility is defined as a performative action exercised by the sender through the mass and social media with a discourse that's appropriate to the reality it describes, *id est*, coherent and endowed with a credibility with which the receiver can fully identify.

Credibility becomes a privileged media imagetext or image-event: a confidence-credibility transposed to the mass media and social media sphere that connects receiver and sender through the message-discourse. Credibility requires a continuous validation from the part of the receiver to the extent that there exists a declarative contract that is accepted by the receiver and assumed by the sender. Needless to say, the contract is fragile and likely to be broken at any moment. Put differently: people tend to believe what they want to believe in each individual

moment according to their values and inclinations. And when they cease to believe they move on and look for a new narrative.

It's maybe appropriate to recall here the words of Spanish theorist and photomedia-based artist Joan Fontcuberta when he affirms, "Photography [and the image in general I would add] is losing its endorsement of empirical roots and its *credibility* becomes dependent of the confidence the photographers themselves earn."[62] In our modernist society something had really happened or was considered true if there was a photo or a moving image to validate it. The problem now is not only that images but also words have lost their privileged relationship to ethics and facts as both are equally vulnerable. Words have been subject to manipulation since the dawn of man, but images too, which we thought were infallible and taken for absolute proof, have become prey of Photoshop and other graphics editors and everyone of us is a potential faker staging and distributing its own subjective narratives.

Picture 3: Obama and Biden await updates on bin Laden.

We could close this part of our argument with a perfect example of what we could call "incredulous credibility": the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. The death of Osama Bin Laden was announced on television on Sunday 1 May 2012 at 11:30 pm (ET). President Barack Obama addressed the nation from the East Wing of the White House. Until this day we (and the press)

hadn't been able to see the corpus delicti, only a photograph shot by Pete Souza from a cramped spot in a corner: We see Obama, Biden and his team in the Situation Room looking out of the frame while they monitor in real time the killing of Osama Bin Laden; also some fake images of Bin Laden's corpse published by various newspapers among which was the British *Daily Mail*;[63] an animated recreation of the assault operation and killing in Abbottabad by Taiwan's Next Media Animation;[64] and of course the block-buster movie *Zero Dark Thirty* by Oscar-winning Kathryn Bigelow, whose narrative will substitute any history book. That's more or less all there is. Lacking the corpus delicti, unlike what happened with Che Guevara, Gadaffi or Sadam Hussein, what credibility merit the words of President Obama? Was the United States establishing a new non-visual regime?

As we well know from *Iliad*, the Greeks were given to *believing-without-seeing*. Modernity showed us that we should only believe that which we saw with our own eyes (certified by a photograph or a moving image). And Barack Obama asked us to go back to the pre-modern habit of *believing-without-seeing*. Is it maybe possible that in our *storytelling* era we're no longer that which we see but only that in which we believe? Maybe truth has given way to credibility?

6. Conclusion

Throughout this essay we have raised the hypothesis about how hyper-narrativity or *storytelling* has imposed itself in western contemporary society, generating an unstoppable excess of discursive narratives. In the first part we took the time-arch that encompasses the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump so as to illustrate the advent and posterior consolidation of *storytelling*. And in order to exemplify our *storytelling* era we relied on the "narrative turn" of both the past and the present: "metahistory," *storytelling*, counterfactual history, "the end of history," conspiracy theory, post-truth and fake news. By doing so we traced most relevant theories that nurtured neo-liberal society when lubricating its narrative machine with view to the manufacturing of both plausible and toxic narratives in our "infodemic" age. And against this background, we proposed the concept of "credibility" as condition for narrativity. "Credibility," as this intangible quality, represents the condition-scale or filter when it comes to verifying the coherence of its narratives. Towards the contextualization of the pre-modern concept of honor we resorted to Homer's *Illiad*, which in turn anticipated Aristotle's concept of *ethos*; for the concepts of charisma and trust-confidence, already in full modernity, we resorted to Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann, respectively. These solid concepts enabled us to elaborate our own concept of "credibility" as "media confidence" amidst this excess of narrative discourses. We suggested that "credibility" constituted a contract of mutual consent between the sender and the receiver that could be broken at any time in a world based on subjective social constructions. The

examples taken from the fields of culture, politics and media allowed us to frame the narrative power of society through its symbols, texts and images when manufacturing credible stories, even if they're not necessarily true. The final aim of this essay has consisted in the coupling of these new and excessive narrative discourses to a communication theory that functions as an intangible shock absorber or buffer in the articulation of the complex and contradictory relationships that entertain the media sphere, culture and politics.

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