
Security culture in the context of populist ideologies and the post-truth society

Vladimir MILOȘEVICI, Ph.D. Student*

*The Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: milosevicivladimir@gmail.com

Abstract

The accelerated development of media technologies in the last decade has not received an adequate response from society as a whole regarding the implementation of a set of ethical norms and legal regulations. This suggests that the environment in which information is created and disseminated has become distorted, allowing for the proliferation of fake news and the multiplication of populist messages.

This article highlights how populist ideologies, amplified by the cultural paradigm of post-truth and fact-free societies, impact security culture by altering the Overton Window. This manipulation of public opinion changes the priorities and directions of security policy. Simultaneously, the article proposes a series of measures to counter fake news and the manipulation of public opinion through populist messages.

Keywords:

fake news; manipulation; post-truth society; society without facts;
populist ideologies; the Overton window; security culture.

In a world deeply focused on the ideas of knowledge and progress, in a world where more than half of us have an image of ourselves that is almost totally opposed to our image as seen by others, in a world where unlimited credit is given to the idea of communication, suggesting and proclaiming through scientific works that the human need for communication is exceeded only by the need for safety, for security, in this slightly confused, slightly phased out world (in the sense that almost no one resonates with anyone anymore) and which has remained blocked in what Alvin Tofler called “the third wave”¹, I will try to present the risks to which we are exposed every day, from reading fiction books or scientific treatises to reading the news on the websites of different news agencies or press trusts or the labels on the various products from supermarkets, namely, *the risk of losing landmarks* and, with it, *the risk of losing contact with reality*.

However, the loss of contact with reality is produced not only by the infinite avalanche of *information* impossible to process, so that it becomes equally impossible to make a decision rationally, but also by the way of *propagating information*, the way in which social determinism meets technological determinism, embedded, of course, in the great sociocultural paradigm of cultural determinism.²

The shift of paradigm inaugurated at the end of the 20th century consisted, in fact, of changing the way we “collect” information, but also the way we process the collected information.

My research will start, first of all, from the premise of such a society, an information society, intrinsically linked to the third industrial revolution or *the third wave*, although the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution, the fourth wave, is here: artificial intelligence (A.I.).

Our resistance to reality, our resistance to truth (*It is obvious that there is a resistance to truth, as long as we accept that we live in a post-truth era!*) went all the way from simple technical image (reproduction with or without technical support) to symbolic language and vice versa (up to the recognition/acceptance of one’s self), from accepting the suffering of the road through the *duplicitous, and sometimes incongruous or illusory brushes of knowledge*, up to the acceptance of suffering given by ignorance.

Security culture. Implications of populist ideologies

The topic I will debate in this article refers to the nature of the information, knowledge, and news that help us make the leap from ignorance to knowledge, but also to what extent all these are adequate to objective reality. (As long as objective reality still represents a horizon and/or a foundation of knowledge). The consciousness of a subjective self was a triumph

¹ The well-known American futurologist Alvin Tofler, in his book *The Third Wave*, states and supports the fact that the third industrial revolution took place at the end of the last century, through the transition from an industrial-type society to an information-type society.

² The theory of cultural determinism affirms and supports the fact that what makes us who we are is culture, the sociocultural environment, as a whole. Thus, individuals raised and educated in different cultures will manifest themselves differently in similar contexts, their behaviors being influenced by the values and ideas specific to the culture they come from. In conclusion, we are deeply influenced by what we assimilate/learn within society, from habits, feeding and clothing to the way we communicate and the way we relate to life.

³ The method of phenomenological reduction establishes two directions of approach. The first direction concerns acts of consciousness (or noetic in Husserlian language), and the second concerns intentional objects (or noematic in Husserlian language). The concept of intentionality starts from the idea that everything we think at the level of consciousness aims at or is directed towards a content of our own consciousness. Thus, Husserl corrects the Cartesian principle of "I think. So, I exist" in the following principle "I think about something/something. So I exist."

⁴ Fact free society represents those theoretical constructs for which truth no longer represents a condition of knowledge and/or development of society as a whole. Basically, the cultural paradigm of the fact-free society believes that the truth becomes irrelevant in the analysis of the society in question.

⁵ The Overtonian Window or Overton Window represents the range of policies that are politically acceptable for the masses of population at a given time. It is also known as the speech window. The term is named after the American philosopher Joseph P. Overton, who stated that the political viability of an idea depends mainly on the condition of inclusion in this field, rather than on the individual preferences of politicians.

According to Overton, the window frames the range of policies a politician can recommend without seeming too extreme, in order to obtain or retain public office, given the climate of public opinion at the time. Basically, the Overton Window is nothing but a window of opportunities, in the sense that any idea or problem can be treated on a two-way axis: from unacceptable to desirable, from illegal to legal, from something absolutely unthinkable to something that can materialize in current policies and even in law and vice versa, that is, what is legal or desirable can reach something illegal or unacceptable in six steps. Those who hold power can manipulate public opinion by using this window of opportunity to impose their ideas in the sphere of society.

⁶ The European Commission has launched an initiative regarding the design of a Code of Good Practice at the EU level on combating online disinformation, and where disinformation is defined as representing "a series of information whose false or misleading nature can be verified, which is created, presented and disseminated to obtain an economic gain or to deliberately mislead the public and which may cause public harm."

of epistemology, just as the consciousness of an originary intentionality represented the leap from the noetic to the noematic.³

Basically, what I will present is nothing but how populist ideologies, amplified by the cultural paradigm of post-truth and fact-free⁴ societies, affect the security culture by manipulating public opinion and altering the Overton Window⁵, in the sense of changing priorities and directions of security policy, with significant consequences at the level of security culture understood as "the result of social interactions that take place in groups, organizations, communities concerned with aspects of social security, of processes of learning and accumulating knowledge, in agreement with the human needs for protection, safety and shelter." (Lungu, Buluc and Deac 2018, 5)

As for how communication, in general, and communication through mass media, in particular, may be and are affected by the amplification of the fake news phenomenon, through *disinformation* and *manipulation* of public opinion, several studies and research have been carried out. However, what we are interested in is highlighting the harmful implications of populist ideologies, amplified by the post-truth paradigm and in the distorted context of fact-free societies.

The phenomenon of fake news, disinformation⁶ (European Commission 2018) and manipulation are terms that are frequently used in media and communication studies. These concepts are essential for understanding how information is transmitted and interpreted in society. In this sense, it must be stated that their impact on public opinion, democracy and security culture is a major one. In the post-truth society, the decay of truth has as a premise the lack of relevance of facts, of what we generically call the sphere of the real. "*Societies where facts are irrelevant become vulnerable to manipulation and control.*" (Snyder 2017, 72)

If the sources of information are no longer trustworthy (including official sources), and the criteria for critical analysis of the evaluation of the validity/invalidity of the discourse of any type are no longer based on facts, societies turn into what we call fact-free societies, with the effect of putting emotion instead of objective truth (correspondence truth⁷). "*Societies where this*

happens are transformed into de facto free societies, and the criterion of truth is replaced by emotional impact. What matters is being able to impose a version of the truth based on wish fulfilment and emotional satisfaction rather than one based on facts. Replacing the truth with the former lies at the basis of understanding the dynamics and ideological distortions of public discourse.” (Dan 2022)

In this context, we mention that populist ideologies and manifestations⁸ amplify the impact of information manipulation on truth and credibility, including the impact of traditional media (mainstream media). Through the use of technology and social networks, false information and disinformation can be spread quickly and widely, and people can be exposed to a variety of distorted or completely fabricated perspectives (truth is relativized or even denied). The consequences of this decay of truth are profound, affecting the processes of political decision-making, increasing social polarization and undermining trust in key societal institutions.

Populism as a political and ideological movement can be characterized by the direct appeal to the people, especially to the socially and economically disadvantaged or marginalized strata, but also by promoting an anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric. Populists claim to represent “the voice of the people” and present themselves as fighters against corruption and social injustice. They promise simple solutions to complex problems and use, in most cases, emotional speech to promote their interests and gain new followers.

In the context of the increase in communication speed and, in particular, the increase in direct access of independent users to media platforms, populist ideologies penetrate more quickly, and the “solutions” they offer find followers much more easily. This has direct consequences on the overtone window by altering the general perception of what is allowed or not allowed.

In this sense, *“Populism changes the collective memory, using memes to alter the belief systems and the stereotypes that underlie the shared value system, using our strong innate need for self-validation and the desire to avoid cognitive dissonance. The criterion for success is not the value of the truth, but the creation of an alternative version of reality, the persuasion of supporters to adopt it, and the forcing of others to accept it.” (Dan 2023)*

A society in which facts have no epistemological and praxeological relevance reflects a tendency towards relativism⁹ and subjectivism¹⁰ in the interpretation and acceptance of facts. This phenomenon can have profound implications for our collective understanding and for the way

⁷ The truth of a judgment is established if there is a concordance between what the statement expresses and the state of facts in reality. Aristotle formulated this idea in the expression “to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true and to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false.”

⁸ Populism, in many of its forms, tends to manipulate and distort the facts in favor of its own political agenda. Some populist leaders adopt a simplistic and polarizing rhetoric, ignoring or denying objective information and evidence that contradict their discourse. This creates a climate where truth becomes relative and contested, and trust in institutions and traditional media is deeply undermined.

⁹ Relativism is based on the idea that the truth or the value of a statement is relative depending on the perspective or context in which they are evaluated. Thus, it can be argued that there is no objective reality or set of absolute facts, only subjective and variable interpretations of the world around us. This can lead to situations where people interpret facts according to their own beliefs, opinions or interests, at the expense of a common base of information and a consensus on reality.

¹⁰ Subjectivism in the interpretation and acceptance of facts refers to the tendency to privilege individual perspective and experience over empirical evidence or expertise. In a society where subjectivism dominates, facts may be disputed or neglected in favor of personal narratives or pre-existing beliefs. This can lead to a decrease in trust in scientific authority and expertise, as individual interpretations or subjective opinions may be considered as valid as or even superior compared to the scientific knowledge basis or expertise in a specific field.

we construct knowledge and make decisions (Rorty 1989). Based on these premises, a series of political actors politicize science and challenge scientific facts to promote their own interests or group interests ([Oreskes and Conway 2010](#)).

The post-truth phenomenon, which develops in such a society, implies that emotions, beliefs and personal narratives become more important than objective facts in the formation of public opinion and in the decision-making process. This obviously has negative consequences, as I said before, in terms of making informed and evidence-based decisions, especially in critical areas such as politics, health, environment or security. “*When we can no longer agree on the basic facts of reality, democracy itself is at risk.*” ([McIntyre 2018](#)) - The paper explores the spread of the post-truth phenomenon in contemporary society and analyzes how it affects the process of forming opinions and decisions based on evidence. The book was published by MIT Press Cambridge.

McIntyre approaches the post-truth concept from multiple perspectives, highlighting its consequences on society and democracy. He explores how the spread of disinformation and the rejection of objective evidence affects people’s ability to make informed decisions and form fact-based opinions.

Moreover, the spread of disinformation can have a significant impact on the perception of threats and vulnerabilities in a society. When facts and evidence are neglected or distorted in favor of false or conspiratorial narratives, it can create confusion and a lack of trust in authorities and experts. This can lead to underestimating or neglecting real threats and overusing resources on imaginary or exaggerated threats. Thus, national security may be compromised and protection measures may be ineffective or inadequate.

Populist ideologies can also use manipulation through the Overton window as a tactic to influence public opinion and advance their agenda. The Overton window, also called the “*window of what is acceptable*” or “*the window of what is debatable*”, refers to the range of ideas or policies considered acceptable or possible in a given society at a given time. Basically, manipulation through the Overton window involves pushing the limit of this window, by presenting extreme or radical ideas gradually and repetitively, so that they gradually become acceptable and debatable in the public debate. Thus, populist ideologies can exploit this tactic to advance their own agenda, bringing into discussion ideas or policies initially considered extreme or inappropriate.

This approach can help create polarization in society and change public discourse, giving legitimacy to ideas or proposals that would otherwise be rejected or criticized. Manipulation through the Overton window can be used to influence public opinion and gain support for policies or measures that would not normally be accepted within a social consensus.

It is especially important to be aware of these tactics and carefully evaluate the ideas and proposals presented in political discourse, ensuring that we are informed and think critically in order to understand their implications and consequences.

Summarizing, we note that populist ideologies amplify the state of decay of the truth through manipulations and disinformation of a classic nature, but also through the manipulation of public opinion and the alteration of the Overton Window, so that the priorities and directions of the security policy can change, having significant consequences on addressing threats and vulnerabilities and, as a consequence, on the decision-making process in security matters.

It thus becomes obvious that the manipulation of public discourse and information in society by populist ideologies influences the Overton Window, i.e. the acceptable limits of public debate. These distortions of public opinion will, in turn, influence the perception of security issues, which will no longer be correlated with the actual state of society, but with one induced by a false image of the real, culminating in the loss of existential meaning, because the copy becomes more real than the real. "The analysis of the relationship between meaning or the possibility of meaning and what, in a broad sense, we call the Real made the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, see the real as being dissolved in the incongruous multiplicity of difference and copies so that it appears rarefied, spectralized. The consistency of the world becomes vague, diffuse because the world has been emptied of substance, becoming inconsistent." (Constantin 2018, 150)

In this reality of incongruous differences, lacking or emptied of meaning, the security policy and the decision-making processes that it entails, require not only an extensive process of verification and analysis of data, of the information from the public space by communication professionals from the public authorities, but, perhaps, first of all, a periodic and constant x-ray of the society as a whole, in order to "photograph" the balance of powers in the state (whether or not they are in balance), the level of democratization of state institutions, as well as the way in which the citizen relates to all this information, following the major directions of influence.

All this is to understand, decode and decrypt the hundreds of thousands of messages, to sort the truth from fake or error, the fake or manipulated image from the real standard image, essential things in creating a database and correct information on which to build the security policy. In order to be able to carry out these activities within the parameters of efficiency, the public institutions with attributions in the development of the security policy must have or recruit among them expert analysts in internal and external politics, social policies, logicians, psychologists, linguists and ITists, with a high moral and professional attitude, who will examine how the truth is distorted and the polarization of discourse affects security policy and decision-making processes.

Possible measures to prevent and combat the manipulation of public opinion through populist ideologies

Therefore, fostering a security culture based on verifiable information and facts, where analysis and decision-making processes are based on solid evidence and objective threat assessments becomes more important than ever. In this context, combating disinformation and promoting information literacy are key elements to counteract the effects of truth decay within the security culture.

Also, strengthening collaboration between security institutions, civil society and the academic sector can contribute to more rigorous threat assessment and to the development of more effective security policies.

DiResta, examining how disinformation spreads in the digital age and analyzing the influence of social media and algorithms on this phenomenon, highlights several tactics and strategies that should be used in disseminating false information ([DiResta 2018](#)).

The same direction is taken by Claire Wardle, who explores the phenomenon of disinformation and offers an interdisciplinary approach to research and policy-making in the field of disinformation. Wardle examines issues related to the production and spread of disinformation, its impact on society, and the implications for democracy and information security ([Wardle 2017](#)).

In my opinion, the development of possible solutions for countering disinformation should include *fact-checking and transparency of information* (promoting verified sources of information, ensuring consistency between information and objective reality and transparency of the news production process to counter the spread of disinformation), collaboration between stakeholders (cooperation between governments, media, online platforms, non-governmental organizations and civil society in order to identify and combat disinformation in a coordinated and consistent way), accountability of online platforms (direct involvement of online platforms in combating disinformation by developing and implementing clear content moderation policies, but also the regulation of this field by imposing sanctions, respecting, at the same time, the right to opinion and the right to information), the development of proactive policies and a system of laws that is coherent and appropriate to the real situation.

These are just a few examples of possible solutions, but only the study of society in the concreteness of the facts and of the practical reality can provide the decision-makers in the security sphere with a more accurate assessment and a deeper perspective on these aspects, which, in the last instance, also belong to the sphere of security culture. That is why, as we specified in the previous point, the training of specialists inside the security systems, as well as the recruitment of some from outside the system, are essential in increasing the capacity to collect, detect and make better use of the information obtained through different techniques. Basically, it is about the efficient use of all categories of information resources.

As for the improvement of the security culture in the context of the propagation of populist ideologies, we consider that this is a complex and particularly important process that requires extensive analysis at the level of decision-makers. However, we believe that some of the most important measures that can be taken into account when considering improving the security culture should focus on the following dimensions:

1. **Media education and literacy:** Promoting media education and literacy can support both specialists and independent users, in the sense that they will manage to understand and critically evaluate the information or data they receive from different media platforms. This education includes developing fact-checking skills, recognizing the signs of manipulation or disinformation, and understanding how they can be influenced by populist discourses.
2. **Promoting critical and rational thinking:** Cultivating critical thinking skills can help individuals analyze and evaluate arguments and ideas presented in populist discourses. This involves developing skills in evaluating information, analyzing evidence-based arguments, and recognizing rhetorical manipulations. This objective can only be achieved through a solid education for security, including at the level of educational programs in the pre-university and academic environment.
3. **Unrestricted access to reliable public information:** It is important to promote access to those sources of verified and maximum reliable information. Governments, intelligence structures, media organizations and online platforms can and must play a more active role in facilitating access to verified information, ensuring, at the same time, the diversity of opinions, of arguments for and against, promoting different perspectives relevant to issues of interest put into public debate.
4. **Civic engagement and open dialogue:** Promoting civic engagement and an open dialogue, based on respect, would certainly contribute to countering the effects of populist propaganda and the social polarization promoted by it. Debates must be encouraged, regardless of the environment in which they take place (radio, TV or online platforms), based on arguments, without resorting to insults or verbal violence, thus ensuring the creation of an environment beneficial for information and decision-making.
5. **Continued strengthening of democratic institutions:** Strengthening democratic institutions, in the sense of ensuring independent justice, a free and responsible media, as well as check and balance institutions that can provide protection against abuses of power and populist manipulations.

Moreover, I believe that, ultimately, the responsibility for everything that appears and is transmitted in the public space/public sphere as a political message or news rests with the government and the institutions with specific attributions in the audiovisual field. "*The public sphere*, by all that this concept implies, (*free market of ideas* in which the opinions of the minority/academic public – experts, specialists,

philosophers, theorists, etc. – have no social relevance, being poorly represented) negatively influences communication at the social level, so, the ideal of the direct/undistorted communication is practically impossible to achieve. Or, the social sphere as a concrete element of the socio-cultural paradigm, in the sense that this paradigm is realized and acts *in and through* the social sphere, also bears the moral responsibility for how artistic and non-artistic products are thought, created and disseminated at a given moment.” (Constantin 2023, 117)

Conclusions

At the same time, we need to emphasize that it is important that this issue be approached holistically, involving both governments and civil society, academia and any other interested parties and, last but not least, the fact that the moral responsibility for what is happening or is communicated in the social sphere must be “shared” between the government, state institutions and administrators of media trusts and platforms.

It is important to promote a culture of rationality and critical analysis of information, to counter the phenomenon of society where facts no longer have relevance. Educating and promoting critical thinking, information literacy and fostering respect for science and expertise can help combat relativism and subjectivism in the interpretation of facts, as well as strengthen the common knowledge base and the scientific authority.

Truth decay can seriously affect security processes and political decision-making. When facts are no longer a priority and relativism dominates, it creates a climate where disinformation and informational manipulation can be used to manipulate the perception of threats and vulnerabilities. This can undermine the processes of threat analysis and assessment, leading to incorrect or inappropriate decisions related to national security.

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