

Editors' Forum Hot Spots

What the Brazilian 2018 Elections Tell Us about Post-Truth in the Neoliberal-Digital Era

FROM THE SERIES: [Bolsonaro and the Unmaking of Brazil](#)

Photo by Fernando Piva/ADUNICAMP. "Amerindian Scholars from Unicamp (State University of Campinas) against budget cuts in education." Student rally against Bolsonaro (Campinas-SP, May 2019).

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January 28, 2020

Publication Information

Cite As: Cesarino, Letícia. 2020. "What the Brazilian 2018 Elections Tell Us about Post-Truth in the Neoliberal-Digital Era." Hot Spots, *Fieldsights*, January 28. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/what-the-brazilian-2018-elections-tell-us-about-post-truth-in-the-neoliberal-digital-era>

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary famously chose *post-truth* as its word of the year. Its definition, separating objectivity from subjectivity, rationality from emotions, seemed, however, flawed by design. At least since Gregory Bateson (1967) joined the pioneer cyberneticists in the 1940s, anthropologists have explored innovative analytical paths for working transversally to these and other divides, such as between individual and society, or freedom and control. I claim this heritage to propose a cybernetic explanation for the contemporary constellation linking post-truth to digital media, existing neoliberalism and conservative populisms, keeping as a touchstone my current research on pro-Bolsonaro digital networks (Cesarino 2019).

The Brazilian case made evident that there is more at play in the rise of conservative populisms around the world than Cambridge Analytica's microtargeting and Robert Mercer's millions. Underlying the massive volume of digital content shared daily on pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp networks during the 2018 campaign, it was possible to discern a handful of metalinguistic functions which resonated closely with the populist mechanics that Ernesto Laclau (2005) described. The extraordinary consistency and regularity of such patterns led me to conclude that Bolsonaro's digital campaign had been itself shaped by some kind of "science of populism" (Cesarino 2019). In the aftermath of a knife attack that removed the candidate from the offline public sphere, this same mechanism was fractally replicated across his sprawling network of supporters—forming what I called, after Ernst Kantorowicz (1957), the "king's digital body."

Remarkable as this was, there was more to it than a digital boost on a classic populist strategy. Digital populism (Cesarino 2019) showed, from a structural perspective, multiple echoes with what others have labeled neoliberalism, post-truth, and the digital structures underlying it (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Harsin 2015; Mirowski 2019). As I turned to the question of post-truth, I approached it as Laclau (2005) had done for populism and, before him, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) for totemism: what patterns underlie the heterogeneity of phenomena currently being put under the umbrella of post-truth? What do fake news, flat-earth communities, virtual rumors, character assassination campaigns, anti-vaccine movements, and outrageous presidential statements have in common?

I began by revisiting fundamental STS approaches to the constitution of truth, or reality. In *Laboratory Life*, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1986) described the laboratory in thermodynamic terms: as a well-bounded negentropic circuit capable of regularly producing order from noise by controlling entropy, that is, by reducing the equiprobability of statements. This understanding of science is reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn's (1970) classic account, where paradigms figure as complexity-reduction mechanisms coextensive with "special" closed communities structured by peer-to-peer mediation, rigid procedural rules, authority-based pedagogy, embodied skill, and, above all, trust. If, as Latour and Woolgar (1986, 243) famously put it, reality (or truth) is "the set of statements considered too costly to modify," then post-truth is a condition of increased equiprobability, where virtually any statement can be challenged at very low, or no, cost.

From this perspective, post-truth may be understood as the emerging epistemic condition in societies increasingly mediated by the neoliberal architecture of digital media, or the digital architecture of neoliberalism. The double crisis of modernity's foremost negentropic structures—the expert system for nature, and constitutional democracies for society—has been accompanied by the rise of "popular" epistemologies better adjusted to such context of rising informational entropy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Three of them—all of which are reminiscent of non-modern knowledge practices well-known to anthropology—stood out in my research: those based on immediate experience, on occult causal links, and on group boundaries.

An outstanding instance of the first has been the higher epistemic status increasingly enjoyed by videos on WhatsApp and other social media. President Bolsonaro himself indulges in statements where he freely contradicts statistics based on his "feelings" or "vision" of "reality." The second includes the online proliferation of conspiratorial narratives, regularly delivered through WhatsApp, YouTube channels, and presidential and ministerial tweets. And thirdly, endless online debates about evidence often lead to a resolution based on the antagonistic divide: as one of Bolsonaro's voters told me on Twitter, "in the end it's all a matter of choice. Of which side you are on." No surprise, then, that he and many others have chosen to grasp for an alleged outsider promising to lead them safely toward truth—which, in a context of epistemic disorder, also means toward reestablishing ontological order (Douglas 1966). In a remarkable inversion (Laclau 2005), the public sphere became the arena of lies, hypocrisy, and manipulation, whereas the president's (almost exclusively digital) camp became the sphere of truth and authenticity.

Finally, the cybernetic view on post-truth also helps shed light on its resonances with phenomena that define our age, such as conservative populisms (Waisbord 2018), the current architecture of digital media (Gerbaudo 2018), actually existing neoliberalism, and possibly others, such as evangelical Christianity: all imply a notion of truth as a posteriori validation (Mirowski 2019); work with an assumption that subjects are influenceable (Marres 2018); are based on user-generated content, which is constantly fed “back into the public that generates it in the first place, in a cybernetic feedback loop” (Mirowski 2019, 23); displace expert systems and broadcast media in favor of digital media that afford a paradoxical experience of non-mediation (Mazzarella 2018); foreground aesthetics, affect, and the vague, redundant, and performative language common to memetics, populist speech, and neoliberal skills such as coaching and self-help; replace Fordist forms of labor and social mobility with financialized, get-rich-quick schemes (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000); and obviate underlying economic and power asymmetries.

While it is post-truth and conservative populisms that have figured in headlines, I agree with Philip Mirowski (2019) that it was the advent of the Internet—history’s “greatest gift” to the neoliberals—and of increasingly capillary digital technologies that slowly but surely paved the way for actualizing their epistemic promise. Liberal democracy was consolidated in a different context, where truth was supposed to emerge in a public sphere from authorized channels organized through clear structures. It remains to be seen whether democracy and science, as we knew them, will survive this perfect neoliberal storm.

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