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**A Research Methodology in the Service of Critical Thinking:  
Hermeneutic Approach in the Post-truth Era**

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**Abstract:** The hermeneutic methodology is an analytical and dialectical approach that is irreplaceable for the development of critical thinking. In the post-truth era, the traditional interpretation of text has given way to more complex interpretative instances in which audiovisual content is the basis of new narratives and new knowledge. Qualitative methodological research has always claimed socio-historical and temporal prominence in the analysis of social phenomena. Accepting this premise, hermeneutics is presented as a plausible methodological research strategy for analyzing the representation of a social fact. Specifically, the aim of this research is to show the potential of hermeneutic analysis by examining two opposing versions of the terrorist attack that took place at the headquarters of the satirical weekly magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, in 2015. To conduct this analysis the

researcher has used the hermeneutic methodology of suspicion (Gadamer, 1960/2004). A main conclusion is that the Internet has become a catalyst for multiple truths in the post-truth era. The Internet is an exhaust pipeline where critical thinking is expounded. The Internet, in short, is a space of resistance where people are able to question the mainstream media's versions and interpretations of events as imposed by the elite Davos Class.

**Keywords:** Research Methodology; Neoliberalism; Post-truth; Critical Thinking; Social Fear

### **Una investigación metodológica al servicio del pensamiento crítico: Una aproximación hermenéutica en la era de la posverdad**

**Resumen:** La metodología hermenéutica representa una aproximación analítica y dialéctica irremplazable para el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico. En la era de la posverdad, la interpretación tradicional del texto ha dejado paso a escenarios interpretativos más complejos donde los recursos audiovisuales son la base de las nuevas narrativas y del nuevo conocimiento. La investigación metodológica cualitativa ha reivindicado siempre la importancia socio-histórica y temporal en el análisis de los fenómenos sociales. Asumiendo esta premisa, el análisis hermenéutico se presenta como una estrategia de investigación metodológica plausible para analizar la manera en que se presenta un hecho social ante una audiencia atemorizada. Concretamente, el objetivo de esta investigación es mostrar el potencial del análisis hermenéutico analizando dos versiones contrapuestas del atentado terrorista que tuvo lugar en la sede del semanal satírico *Charlie Hebdo* (2015). Para abordar este análisis he utilizado la metodología hermenéutica de la sospecha (Gadamer, 1960/2004) adaptada al contexto audiovisual. Una de las conclusiones más relevantes de este análisis es que Internet se ha convertido en el catalizador de múltiples verdades. Una válvula de escape donde resurge el nuevo pensamiento crítico y un espacio de resistencia donde luchar contra la versión mediática, oficial y hegemónica impulsada por la "Davos Class."

**Palabras-clave:** Investigación Metodológica; Neoliberalismo; Posverdad; Pensamiento Crítico; Miedo

### **Una investigação metodológica ao serviço do pensamento crítico: Uma aproximação hermenêutica en la era de la pós-verdad**

**Resumo:** A metodologia hermenêutica representa uma aproximação analítica e dialéctica irremediável para o desenvolvimento do pensamento crítico. En la era de la pós-verdad, la interpretación tradicional del texto ha dejado paso a escenarios interpretativos más complejos donde los recursos audiovisuais a base das nuevas narrativas e o novo conhecimento. A investigação metodológica cualitativa tem reivindicado a importância sócio-histórica e temporal na análise dos fenómenos sociais. Asumiendo esta premisa, a análise hermenêutica se apresenta como uma estratégia de investigação metodológica plausível para analizar a gestão de pessoas que apresentem uma perspectiva social ante una audiencia atemorizada. Concretamente, u objetivo desta pesquisa é mostrar o potencial da análise hermenêutica das versões contrapostas do terrorista que tuvo lugar na sede do calendário semanal *Charlie Hebdo* (2015). Para abordar esta análise utilizou-se a metodologia hermenêutica da sospagem (Gadamer, 1960/2004) adaptada ao contexto audiovisual. Uma das conclusões mais relevantes desta análise é que a Internet se converteu no catalizador de múltiplos verdades. Una válvula de escape foi resgatada no novo momento crítico e um espacio de resistência donde luchar contra a versão mediática, oficial e hegemónica impulsada pela "Classe de Davos."

**Palavras-chave:** Investigación Metodológica: Neoliberalismo: Posverdad: Pensamiento Crítico: Miedo

## Introduction

Technological progress has substantially redefined the cultural practices of modern societies. Today, we do not understand social life without connectivity, without mobile phones, without news in the form of instant messages or without global positioning satellite (GPS) devices that tell us the shortest way to our destination. This technological scenario is the basis of the new audiovisual culture (Loughridge, 2015; Enticknap 2013; Miklitsch, 2006), a culture in which traditional language has been modified by a more interactive interaction founded on images and sounds. The use of this audiovisual language has generated new modes of socialization, new quotidian narratives, new social meanings and, in short, new social knowledge. The predominance of audiovisual language leads the object of study, hermeneutic analysis, to evolve towards a fusion of traditional text and audiovisual content. Taking into account this social and historical particularity in the “space-time” (Gadamer, 1976) hermeneutic research is challenged to reflect on the *new horizons* of audiovisual language by looking beyond the images and listening beyond the sounds. Knoblauch & Schnettler (2012) point out that “video analysis is a hermeneutic activity in the sense that it requires a proper method of sociological understanding” (p. 353).

Although text has been the raw material of hermeneutical research methodology since its inception (Thirsk & Clark, 2017), it would be naive to think that hermeneutical methodology has focused exclusively on the sole interpretation of text. Adorno, Benjamin and Gadamer state that this methodology “not only addressed the meanings of texts but also of other types of expressions such as musicals and the visual arts” (Weiss, 2017, p. 637). The main problem today is that audiovisual content and narratives are presented to the audience as symbols of irrevocable truth, leaving very little leeway for critical or alternative interpretations. An image, unlike text, has a truly hegemonic meaning. As a result, it is extremely complex to question its’ content; in other words, it is very difficult to lay the foundations of the hermeneutic circle between *text* and *context* and, in short, it is very difficult to fulfill the task of understanding social phenomena proposed by Dilthey and Schleiermacher.

One of the fundamental theses of hermeneutic methodology research is that truth has a relatively and historically situated component (Gadamer, 1960/2004); that is, we are part of a world of shared meanings (Adams & Van Manen, 2017) that evolves over time and that Heidegger defined as *dasein*, or *being in the world*. This aprioristic influence of the social context is essential in hermeneutic analysis because it allows us to analyze “the influence that exists beyond language resources to understand how the story was told” (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 119). Analysis of the social context permits the exploration of new dimensions and hidden meanings of the social phenomenon (Grbich, 2007; Heidegger, 1927). It is, without a doubt, a type of second-order analysis (Schutz, 1962) that promotes the critical perspective of the social object (Kushner & Morrow, 2003).

Education, and specifically education policies, play a key role in understanding this new communication framework dominated by post-truth strategies. Today's audiovisual culture is undergoing a profound crisis of veracity. “There exists today simultaneity of contrary truths that collude to produce an affective state of disorientation and apathetic distance” (Kuntz, 2015, p. 94). We are in the post-truth era, that is, a “space-time” in which the unique and objective truth of facts has ceased to have the social importance attached to it since the Enlightenment. The word post-truth is understood as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief?” (Oxford

Dictionary, 2016) and has been a key factor in the analysis of recent socio-political phenomena such as the victory of Donald Trump and Brexit (Harris, 2016; Walters & Watters, 2017).

The origin of post-truth strategies is older than it seems. In fact, it is the ancient sophist practice of the Greek world, where philosophers trained the first political leaders in the art of persuasion. “Protágoras taught the art by which bad reasons and bad arguments could become good ones, that is, the art of arguing skillfully both for and against any thesis” (Carpio, 2015, p. 113). This argumentative logic is also present in Bloor's (1976) concept of symmetry, where the “same types of causes would explain, say, true and false beliefs” (Lynch, 2017, p. 595); in other words, in the analysis of social interactions there are, symmetrically, two antagonistic positions—towards truth or lies—that depend on each person's beliefs and feelings (Lakoff, 2017). Our position in the face of social dilemmas is the result of the interpretation of facts (*logos*) and their coherence with the ethics, morals and emotions of the person (*pathos*). Think, for example, of issues as sensitive to scientific knowledge as climate change (Boaxall, 2017) or anti-vaccination movements (Munk & O’Keeffe, 2017) and we will see that there are symmetrical arguments both for and against them.

Fragmented truths must be reconstructed through hermeneutic research methodology. The aim of this paper is to explore two audiovisual examples that represent two opposing interpretations of a social phenomenon, namely the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. The goal of this analysis is not to seek the truth of what happened, but to create a space for reflection that allows us to interpret the causes and consequences of the production and broadcasting of this type of audiovisual content that is grounded on social fear. The hermeneutic interpretation of these audiovisual contents also has a multidisciplinary dimension that brings together the analysis of the audience's persuasive communication strategies and the prospective design of educational policies that confront the spread of post-truth messages. At this critical moment, we need to reflect on both the media literacy of audiovisual content and on the emotions that the media's content and commentary provoke in us. The change in communication strategies implies an educational change in the way we interpret this content.

## Educational Policies and Hermeneutics in the Post-truth Era

The current dystopia of truth leads us to ask two basic questions. First, what are the challenges to educational policy in our current post-truth time, and second, what aspects of hermeneutic research could be useful to promote educational proposals as a result of such fragile audiovisual scenario? The starting hypothesis states that audiovisual culture is based on an *apparently* simpler and more unified language but is *essentially* defined by media strategies aimed at persuading the audience through an emotional connection (*logos-pathos*). The use of methodological hermeneutic research is one way to understand the hidden meanings behind the dissemination of audiovisual content (Kafle, 2013; Miles et al., 2013). It will be necessary for audiences to have a hermeneutic understanding of the media's communication strategies in order to counteract the serious effects of how the media presents images, sounds and interpretations to audiences in this post-truth era. Therefore, educational policy must make it a priority to address two issues at the curricular level: on one hand, media literacy is essential, as is education about the creation of conscious emotional impact through audiovisual content.

In the process of audiovisual learning, media literacy represents the first topic connected to how audiovisual content is designed for an audience. Normally, “Literacy is considered by the decision-makers only in the perspective of technical resources and mechanical skills” (Guillén & Blasco, 2010, p. 390). However, media literacy is more complex and multidimensional than that (Arrieta & Montes, 2011) and use of hermeneutic method is crucial to reinforce this idea. Consider,

for example, a person who has downloaded a free application to his/her phone where he/she receives news in real time. To enjoy this application, the person has allowed access to his/her contact list, location history and photo folder, among other requirements. The question is: Does this person know the implications of the disclosure of this type of information? And, if so, is there a real awareness of the social implications that the release of such information may have? Strategies to gain users' personal information are very effective because they increase our desire to own (pathos), in this case, a free app and minimize the agreement (logos): 'provide information in exchange for the free use'. The pathos-logos battle can only be tackled with critical educational proposals to which must be added, in this case, reflective media literacy (Burn & Durran, 2007; Weninger, 2017).

The complexity of media literacy (Arriazu, 2015) connects with the second major topic that needs to be addressed in education policy: emotional education. So far, emotional education has fulfilled a curricular function of mere identification; that is, it is focused on knowing how the person feels. In the context of post-truth, the challenge of emotional education is to identify emotions in terms of causality, i.e. if I see a particular audiovisual content, why have I expressed this emotional reaction? It is about providing an education that, like hermeneutics, provides a wider space for reflection, interpretation and critical thinking of audiovisual content

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, acknowledged in his appearance before the U.S. Congress that the data generated on social networks is an important weapon to meet potential voters.<sup>1</sup> Audiovisual content has been a lure to make social networks aware of the most intimate aspects of our social identities. Emotions dominate reason and, in this case, the desire to be part of social networks is something suggestive and fun for users. It is a friendly and seemingly harmless environment, but each of our interactions will be fed into the algorithm when designing our preference profiles. The eyes of Big Brother are taking advantage of the absence of discernment we have on the use of audiovisual content.

Considering the lack of skills that many viewers have when dealing with audiovisual content in the post-truth era, the question now is, what dimensions of hermeneutic research can be incorporated into the new curricular content? In this sense, social interpretations emphasize both the in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences (Tuohy et al., 2013) and the influences of social context, taking into account not only the explicit dimensions of the audiovisual contents but also the implicit dimensions of the production context (Josselson, 2004; Kaffle, 2013). In the hermeneutic analysis the critical perspective is used to identify ideological positions, sources of alienation, and power structures (Kushner & Morrow, 2003).

For example, the audiovisual content we share on social media networks is an invaluable source of information for the structures Foucault (1976/2011) defined as bio-power. Our naïve interactions on digital platforms and, in short, our audiovisual consumption have provided sufficient information on our social identity and, without being fully aware of it, we have stripped off our clothes in the face of algorithms and data mining. Virtual platforms have made the tracing of our audiovisual consumption profitable and, more importantly, these platforms are now able to predict our social behavior both inside and outside the network. "We're entering a world of constant data-driven predictions where we may not be able to explain the reasons behind our decisions" (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013, p. 17). Some people may think that this is not an important issue, but the problem is that no one has made us aware of the social impact of sharing our daily lives on the Internet.

Today, applying the methodology of hermeneutic research is an urgent necessity in view of the lack of audiovisual critical thinking that characterizes modern societies. The problem is bigger

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<sup>1</sup> Access to the complete news is available at the following link: <https://goo.gl/yDfTGT>

than it may appear. It would be ingenuous to think that predictive models only affect audiovisual consumption. The predictive models of data mining are aimed at deconstructing ideological frameworks of citizenship through communicative strategies of social reality. The “*Deep Root*”—software used by Cambridge Analytics in Donald Trump's election campaign—was very useful for learning about the most sensitive social profiles regarding the problem of immigration and for sending them personalized advertising.<sup>2</sup> The results of this seemingly harmless political marketing strategy are just one example that helps us understand how these silent ideological attacks work and what effect they have on the population (Williams, 2017).

There is a strong interdependent relationship between the media and the power elites. Bio-power is a way of exercising control and domination over a people without using the last resort of law and death (Foucault, 1984/2005). Bio-power is put into practice through bio-politics and is understood as a new, subtler order of governance that regulates the power to dispense fear and death (Giroux, 2008). Bio-politics has modified the functioning of sovereignty and power and is now exercised in an invisible way through fear. The old state ideological apparatus (Althusser, 1970) of structuralism is today an improved version of itself. Nowadays the most effective communicative strategy of social control is audiovisual content based on fear. In this respect, Brenner & Theodore (2002) point out an interesting paradox: “While neoliberalism aspires to create a ‘utopia’ of free markets liberated from all forms of state interference, it has in practice entailed a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose market rule upon all aspects of social life” (p. 352).

Behind every TV channel, radio, newspaper or social network different political ideologies are represented with varying degrees of emphasis (Chomsky & Dieterich, 1998; McNair, 2017). Fear and risk analysis have been tackled from different theoretical approaches (Altheide, 2009; Bauman, 2006/2007; Beck, 1992, 1999; Furedi, 2002; Glassner, 1999; Svendsen, 2008). However, it is undeniable that there is a difference before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This tragedy has led to a focus on the fear of one specific threat: the terrorist threat of radical Jihadism.

The audiovisual content viewers' first emotional reactions are identification and unification in the face of the threat. “Depictions of fear, patriotism, consumption, and victimization contributed to the emergence of a national identity” (Altheide, 2004, p. 290). Socially shared fear arouses a patriotic feeling in which individuals show an “uncritical acceptance of government authority” (Giroux, 2002, p. 335). Fear thus becomes a form of control and domination. “The essential paradox is that a society apparently more secure than any before it has produced a pervasive culture of fear” (Cricher, 2011, p. 268). This contradictory argument is also shared by authors such as Altheide (2004) and Bauman (2006/2007). Is fear “real” in the context of post-truth discourses or is it only a communication strategy? “There can be no fear without actual victims or potential victims” (Altheide, 2006a, p. 434). We live in a constant state of fear (Art, 2017; Tudor, 2005) and, most importantly, our perception of fear is real and true.

Hermeneutic research is a basic resource in the analysis of audiovisual content based on the fears of the audience. The combination of emotion and reason merges around audiovisual content and requires in-depth interpretive research. The Aristotelian triangle of persuasion as applied to audiovisual “truth” allows us to identify three fundamental elements: the previous credibility of the transmitter (ethos), an emotional link that connects the audience with what is being reported (pathos) and a set of logical evidence (logos) that make a truth seem more credible (Montgomery, 2017). These three factors are visually integrated and encourage the viewer to accept or reject a

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<sup>2</sup> Access to the complete interview with Jared Kushner available at the following link <https://goo.gl/9RWP8y>

“truth.” When a person detects any contradiction between any of these factors (*ethos, pathos and/or logos*) it provokes a rejection of the “truth.” In this post-truth era, *logos* has lost its traditional prominence. When empirical evidence is not connected to our ethical, moral and emotional thoughts (*pathos*), many people reject it and seek new alternative truths that justify their point of view.

What happens when an emotion such as fear becomes the core of the audiovisual content? Fear is a primary emotion in which the person submits to a power greater than their own (Kemper, 1978). Fear is also a tool that weakens critical thinking in the reflection and interpretation of social reality. Fear has become a socially shared element in Western societies. “Fear also constitutes a societal emotion, in other words, an emotion that essentially characterizes the *ethos* of our postmodern societies” (Bericat, 2015, p. 14). Critical thinking is one of the victims of today's culture of fear. A frightened society is a captive of its own emotions and a victim of the consequences of fear. As Giroux (2017) points out, “Critical thinking and dissent are subordinated if not cancelled out by the pleasure quotient and hyped-up sensationalism produced in the fog and fantasy of moral panics, a culture of fear, and the spectacle of violence” (p. 4). In such a delicate time as the present, it is more necessary than ever to continue promoting the critical spirit of citizenship. In the post-truth era, “dramaturgy and TV wars, critical pedagogies and interpretive methodologies of truth must be assessed in terms of their ability to produce love, justice, empowerment and freedom” (Denzin, 2004, p. 140).

In short, the current post-truth context is a media scenario dominated by audiovisual content that appeals more to the viewer's primary emotions such as fear (*pathos*) than to traditional facts (*logos*). Education policy should include curricular content that goes beyond the “facts” and examines the level of emotional control produced by the media. To achieve this it will be necessary to use the interpretative logic of hermeneutic research.

## Method

Hermeneutic research, as a branch of phenomenology initiated by Husserl (Kafle, 2013), is the starting point of this qualitative analysis. “The particular focus of the Social Sciences is the attempt to understand the massive transformations—still continuing today” (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 4). The aim of this research is to comprehend the potential of the hermeneutic research methodology in the analysis of the dissemination of audiovisual contents based on both social fear and critical thinking. Theoretical contributions regarding the qualitative paradigm in social research are central to tackling this issue. Specifically, the researcher used the audiovisual interpretative hermeneutics—understood as a natural evolution of Heidegger's traditional approach (1927/1962)—in which the dialogical relationship between the text and the context (the hermeneutic circle) is fundamental to explaining the object of study. Rapport and Wainwright (2006) point out that the hermeneutic circle is a continuous process of interpretation through understanding and re-examination of propositions.

Hermeneutical methodology research takes into account the technological and virtual dimensions of each context in which audiovisual content is produced. New meanings emerging from data, narratives and traditional interpretations (Clarke, 1999) are today very complex entities and are encumbered with new connotations, thanks to the impact of the visual elements and the digital context (Crist & Tanner, 2003). The methodological approach is consistent with Denzin's proposal (2017) that “Critical scholars are committed to showing how the practices of critical, interpretive qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways” (p. 12). In short, “we need to engage in a different type of truth-telling” (Kuntz, 2015, p. 98).

The methodological procedure uses a logical interpretative sequence. The research started from the premise that “evidence is never morally or ethically neutral” (Denzin, 2009, p. 142), and in the words of Gadamer, “discovery of true meaning is never finished, it is an infinite process” (Miles, 2013, p. 274). Despite this limitation, the first level of analysis focuses on how information is presented to the audience. Second, it tackles how audiovisual rhetoric is constructed following Denzin's (2014) interpretative proposal, including ontology (the nature of the being), epistemology (knowledge of the being), methodology (questions of the being) and ethics (moral conduct and purposes of the being). The result of these hermeneutic analyses shows the interdependence between the four basic parts of the hermeneutic unit (image, text, message and context) in the media's outreach strategy.

To carry out this analysis I selected two videos showing contrasting versions of the terrorist attack at *Charlie Hebdo's* headquarters. These videos are available on the Internet. To select the audiovisual content, a specific criterion was established: the videos must display the complete sequence of images of the shots at the injured policeman on the ground. Initially, a search was carried out on YouTube using the following sequence of words: “Charlie Hebdo attack.”<sup>3</sup> The results showed that eight of the ten most visited videos on this platform had eliminated the entire shooting extract—an extract that, curiously, had been broadcast over and over again by the mainstream media on the day of the terrorist attack. Keeping this limitation in mind, the first video selected is a news broadcast on the Mexican channel C3N-C28<sup>4</sup> with a total of 7,669 views on its YouTube channel (17/02/2018). Despite its limited dissemination on the Internet, the video is an example of the “official version” broadcast around the world. Paradoxically, this television channel stopped broadcasting on 23 October 2015, which is an important fact that explains the accessibility of this audiovisual content. The second video selected is a critical version of the terrorist attack. The video,<sup>5</sup> entitled “Charlie Hebdo Shootings - Censored Video” has a total of 3,077,218 views on YouTube (17/02/2018) and ranked first in the search described above. The author is given as an anonymous user called “StormCloudsGathering.” This video had a strong online impact because there is also an “alternative version” backed by new evidence and analogies.

The selection of this audiovisual material also has a multidisciplinary perspective that unifies communication strategies and educational policies. As noted above, the critical analysis of information is a priority in a world where the “truth” of objective facts is increasingly mediated by emotions. Only education, and especially education policies, can promote changes that create an audience that is no longer a passive and manipulable entity.

## Spreading Fear in the Mainstream Media

The first issue in the hermeneutical analysis relates to how the information from the terrorist attack is presented to the audience. Specifically, I am interested in analyzing what media strategies have been used for the construction and (de)construction of the audiovisual story and what communicative resources are used to create different “types of truth” in a dystopian scenario such as

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<sup>3</sup> YouTube search results are available at <https://goo.gl/WaakV7>

<sup>4</sup> Online version retrieved from YouTube. Video I (official version) is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZHcYFQpCjo> A downloadable version from the author's Dropbox server is available at <https://goo.gl/vXopPQ>

<sup>5</sup> Online version retrieved from YouTube. Video II (alternative version) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjEvlKKm6og&bpctr=1519842182>. Downloadable version from the author's Dropbox server <https://goo.gl/LMHQLQ>



the hours after the terrorist attack. The population's shock translates into widespread social fear that is expressed and shared via multiple online platforms, expressing a type of fear that is also irrational, and that seeks clear and forceful explanations in the mainstream media. A fear, in short, that provokes a collective emotion and demands a plausible, fast and truthful explanation.

Taking this approach into account, the first video selected represents the official and hegemonic version of the terrorist attack. This is a version with a high impact on people; it was broadcast by a large number of media outlets around the world. Specifically, the video was broadcast on channel C3N-C28 (Multimedia Image Group) in prime time (21:05 hours) on the day of the terrorist attack and lasts for 57 seconds. The audio-visual story shows a clear and direct message to the audience: a terrorist attack has occurred on the site of the French satirical weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo as a sign of vengeance for the cartoons published about the Arabic prophet Mohammed.

The information was presented with the headline of the news bulletin and the slogan "Cadena 3, the most open TV channel ever." After this beginning, it showed a sequence of a man lowering the French flag followed by a voice-over, reporting that "France is in mourning." The name of the reporter, Oscar Gallego, appears at the bottom of the screen during the initial images. The researcher assumes that this reporter is also the voice-over narrator. The news begins with the following words: "Hooded gunmen murdered at least 12 people and wounded eight in the satirical weekly 'Charlie Hebdo'" while a sequence of images of police and health personnel mobilized in the street appears. The information becomes more and more disturbing until it reaches its climax when the reporter anticipates what the audience is about to witness. The statement, "this is the moment of the attack where the aggressors shouted 'we have avenged Mohammed'" shows the controversial images of the shooting of a wounded policeman on the ground. The news concludes with a reminder of the victims' figures, showing images of Stéphane Charbonnier, the Director of *Charlie Hebdo*, murdered, and four photographs of the magazine's main cartoonists.

The next level of analysis tries to answer the question: How, and through which communication strategies, has fear been generated by the news? When analyzing the construction of the narrative of fear, it is important to take into account the credibility of the mainstream media before the news (*ethos*). In other words, viewers believe that the news is truthful because the mainstream media are companies that are professionally engaged in journalistic work. Another important factor in the analysis of news is the viewer's role. In video I, the communicative strategy is designed to generate a high emotional impact by considering the audience as a passive and uncritical subject. The fear-forming strategy has a structure similar to Gauss's bell. The intensity of the audiovisual contents gradually increase until it reaches the maximum intensity, and then it reduces the viewers' nervousness by recalling the figure of the victims.

The audiovisual structure of the news has four levels, in which fear is transmitted in different ways. First, the presentation of the news begins with the voice-over "France is in mourning," fused with the image of the descent of the flag. This is a communication strategy designed to create a state of alert and concern in the audience. The first thought this message evokes is, "what has happened in France to make its citizens mourn?" This is the question that would be asked by any viewer, and it is also the first emotional level of fear based on a concern for something we do not yet know about. Capturing the audience's attention, video I shows a set of images showing police and health workers in the streets of Paris. It is a scene in which the bewilderment and chaos is visually predominant. The audiovisual sequence also has the sound of sirens and a voice-over telling the story of the terrorist attack. The implicit message conveyed to the viewer is, "a terrorist attack has occurred in France and it is serious because the police and ambulances are deployed on the street." The initial concern caused by the lowering of the flag gives way to the interpretation of a concrete

fact (*logos*), in this case a terrorist attack. It is the moment when the audience concentrates its highest level of attention on the news; and it is also the moment when the audience needs a rational, logical and coherent explanation. This excerpt also represents the second emotional level of the news, a level focused on drawing the spectator's attention by showing the consequences of the terrorist attack.

The most shocking and controversial point of the audiovisual narrative is the sequence from the amateur video where a wounded policeman is shot down by one of the attackers. The voice-over reporter points out, "this is the moment of the attack when the aggressors shouted, 'we have avenged Mohammed'" and then the images of two hooded men shouting in the middle of the street appear. Seconds later, the injured policeman is shot on the ground and the hooded men escape in a black car. In addition to the rawness of the images, we must also add the sonorous helplessness; that is, the spectator does not have the reporter's help to decode the images. The absence of a voice-over gives more realism to the news by transforming the spectator into a face-to-face witness of what has happened. The implicit message conveyed to the audience is, "look at how the injured policeman has been shot on the ground. This video is the greatest proof of truthfulness." The image of the shot is the irrefutable proof of the truth of the facts.

The third emotional level of the news was no longer aimed at capturing the audience's interest but rather in exposing them to fear, in this case by witnessing a murder. This level seeks the audience's emotional reaction (*pathos*) in its different aspect, such as fear, anger, and sadness. The objective fact (*logos*) is not in question, because we have been "witnesses" to a murder. Critical thinking does not exist because it is dominated by the *ethos* of traditional media.

The last emotional level of the news reduces the pressure deliberately created by the news report by seeking to extol the memory of the victims of the terrorist attack. The latest news footage combines videos of Stéphane Charbonnier with a final layout showing photographs of four victims. The intention at this stage is to lower the audience's emotional tension by looking at the consequences of the terrorist attack; in this case, the victims. The implicit message is the fragility of life due to the current terrorist threat. Today, we are living in motion—like Stéphane Charbonnier was in past videos—and seconds later, we could be static or dead, like the photographs of the victims.

The four emotional levels analyzed in video I are an example of the multiple communication strategies used to transmit fear in society. As has been proven, the daily news in the mainstream media is based not only on facts but also on the ideological and emotional strategies that are deliberately chosen to present the information. The ideological approaches to information have existed previously; however, what used to be journalistic nuances in the past are today, in the post-truth era, perfectly designed communication strategies deliberately chosen to connect with the emotions of the passive audience.

## The (De)Construction of Hegemonic Truth

Video II is a counterexample to the official version of the terrorist attack. The communication strategy of this audiovisual content is to discredit the hegemonic version broadcast by the mainstream media. Before beginning the analysis, it is important to underline that this video does not deny the veracity of the terrorist attack explicitly. Video II questions the veracity of the most shocking images shown by the news, that is, the shots fired at the injured policeman on the ground. This point is of the utmost importance in hermeneutical analysis because the questioning of a part of the truth will end up being (implicitly) the questioning of the totality of the news and the

questioning of the ideological function carried out by the mainstream media. It is a direct attack on the *ethos* of the media through the interpretation of new alternative *logos* using critical thinking.

Video II was uploaded on YouTube's "StormCloudsGathering" page three days after the terrorist attack. With duration of 2:51 minutes, video II provides new evidence examining the veracity of the images broadcast by the mainstream media. This alternative interpretation of the images of the terrorist attack is based on logical formulations and a critical perspective. It is a provocative version that breaks the traditional patterns of "truth." The intent of video II is to challenge the audience and reverse the previously defined sense of truth. The critical approach is evident from the beginning, as shown by the title: "The Charlie Hebdo shooting - Censored video."

The word censorship is the first claim that attracts the reader's attention in the audiovisual hermeneutics. The title evokes unanswered questions. "Has there been censorship of the information provided by the media about the attack? And if so, what material has been censored?" The audiovisual story begins with images where dark clouds appear followed by a voice-over that says, "I am going to show you some footage of the Charlie Hebdo shootings which has been restricted or taken down from a number of websites. As you will see, it contains no blood, gore or graphic violence. It does, however, punch a major hole in the official story. You can draw your own conclusions." At the end of this introduction, the official version broadcast by the TV channel France 24 appears. Specifically, images of the injured policeman on the ground are shown with a secondary screen visual effect. This effect serves to differentiate the official version of the mainstream media from what will later, and in full screen, be the critical analysis carried out by "StormCloudsGathering." The symbolic distance used with this visual effect allows the audience to identify at first glance the different versions and types of truth that exist about the terrorist attack.

The first strategy used to discredit the official version is to affirm that the images were edited. This blunt argument contradicts the official version, in which it was claimed that the images of the shots fired at the wounded policeman had been recorded by an amateur videotaping the incident. In order to provide more credibility to this critical position, the author of video II conducted a thorough and detailed analysis of the controversial images. The use of a slow-motion camera, zoom, and the systematic repetition of images are the main audiovisual resources used to question the official version. The implicit message of this communication strategy is, "if you look closely at the images, you will realize that they have been manipulated." The aim of this counter-hegemonic version is to make the viewer review the most shocking and emotional part of the news. Specifically, the excerpt of the shot fired at the injured policeman is analyzed in great detail. As with video I, a voice-over plays a very important role in decoding the images. The voice-over, "the officer is not actually hit by a bullet," is direct and is accompanied by the repetition in slow motion of the moment of the shooting, looking at the trail of dust that can be seen right in front of the head of the policeman lying on the ground.

Building on the viewer's initial doubt, video II then poses a major challenge to the audience by wondering what the K-47 shot would have been like over such a short distance. To address this question video II uses the analogy technique, discrediting the official version by showing the consequences of the same weapon shooting at a similar distance but in this case at a watermelon. This message reinforces the viewer's initial doubt and conveys an implicit approach to the audience that "this is what should have happened." The audience is stunned by the lack of a logical and rational response. Very skillfully, the analogy of shooting at watermelon makes the video nonviolent and, consequently, not censored by YouTube; however, there is also another implicit message that it transmits; "if the shooting shown on the news had been true, you would have seen a much bloodier image."

In order to keep reinforcing the credibility of the counter-hegemonic version, the viewer's attention is drawn to the size of the bullet by showing a static image in which the real dimensions can be seen beside a ruler. After showing the bullet's size, the sequence of the shot fired at the police officer is displayed in slow motion and repeated again. The narrator addresses the discourse to the mainstream media by saying, "Anyone who claims that this footage shows someone being hit in the head by a 7.62 by 39 millimeter round either has no experience with guns or is lying." This direct affirmation represents the essence of critical thinking.

Once the facts (*logos*) are invalidated, video II seeks to make an emotional connection with the audience. The emotional bond is based on empathy with the critical audience. The voice-over tells the viewer, "This officer was not killed by gunshot to the head. My first thought was, ok they missed." This message is accompanied by a repeat of the shooting sequence. Recognizing and accepting the hypothesis, the voice-over gives a vindictive twist in honor of the truth. "Every single mainstream media outlet is claiming that he was finished off with a shot to the head, and that is blatantly false." This statement hides a claim to know "the real truth" of what has "really" happened.

The last part of video II is an allegation to promote critical thinking in the audience. Critical reasoning gives rise to new syllogisms, new analogies and new questions of truth, including the questions raised by video II. The counter-hegemonic version of the event generates more doubts than certainties, and that is always disturbing for a frightened viewers. For this reason, the final moments of video II are dedicated to empowering the audience by considering media manipulation as a real media strategy. The images fuse with a final voice-over saying, "I am not gonna claim to know what really happened here, but we are being lied to. And lies like this, mean trouble is coming." This final message is intended to instill mistrust and also a certain fear if we do not reflect critically about news in the future. The message encourages the audience by promoting a more active and critical attitude towards the audiovisual contents of the news video. The video II sows a skeptical point of view before the audience in a conclusive way and breaks both the truth of the news and the credibility of the mainstream media. The Internet, and in this case YouTube, have become spaces of resistance, where we will not only find and share logical and critical reasoning, but also emotional reasoning.

## Conclusions

The hermeneutical analysis carried out has demonstrated how media dissemination strategies use fear and critical thinking in the post-truth era. Both videos are faithful examples of the struggle between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic media to make credible reports of events such as a terrorist attack. Paradoxically, and regardless of the truthfulness of video I or video II, both videos provoke an emotional reaction in the audience in the form of hatred, resentment and a desire for revenge. On one hand, emotions are projected towards radical Jihadism, and on the other, towards the economic-political and media elites guilty of deception. Foucault's (1976/2011) proposal on the domination of citizenship must today be updated to include a more unstable context in which domination and resistance to domination coexist. The mainstream media exposes a version of the truth, but immediately other viewpoints emerge from the non-mainstream media, such as private individuals posting on websites such as YouTube. There is an ongoing struggle in which only the uninformed audience loses. To counter this serious problem, new educational policies to change curriculum based on media literacy and education about the emotional aspects of audiovisual content need to be implemented.

It has been proven that "groups aspiring to power seek to gain leverage and legitimacy through media" (Altheide, 2006b, p. 48). It has also been shown that the mass media not only

reports objective facts but also generates opinions and emotions about social realities. However, it would be a mistake to place all the responsibility on the mainstream media and the dominant elites. Critical thinking must be born of self-criticism. To achieve this we need up-to-date education policies on media literacy and education that address the current complexity of emotions generated by audiovisual content. We cannot merely be passive consumers of manipulated information and news, or we will be victims of domination. We have the responsibility to search for, contrast and reflect on our own reality. As Giroux (2008) points out: “We need new political and educational narratives about what is possible in terms of producing a different future, what it means to promote new modes of global responsibility, and what it takes to create sites and strategies in which resistance to neoliberal bio-politics becomes possible” (p. 614).

Critical thinking must have both resistance and social transformation as its goals. Resistance involves fighting against the established powers and prevailing neoliberalism; however, transforming implies the empowerment of critical ideas vis-à-vis factual powers. Today, audiovisual content is a very useful tool in the creation and diffusion of shared critical thinking. It is important to exploit audiovisual content’s potential and not rely too heavily on its apparent democratization. The twin monsters of “datification” (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013) and “big data” (Art, 2017) stand as firm candidates for relegating traditional factual powers. We need to be aware, for example, that everyone who has access to YouTube to view the audiovisual content selected in this research has been registered by the system and, as a result, YouTube knows that we have seen two different versions of the same social fact and that we may have doubts about the official version of the attack. Whether we like it or not, data mining analysis is becoming a new form of invisible social control.

The Internet has become a catalyst for all kinds of information and misinformation (Andrejevic, 2013). Now, we are accumulating more information than in the previous 20 centuries, and this has led to a serious problem when it comes to recognizing what is true, or not, and how much is true. Having a critical approach is a more complex educational task today than when Plato invited us to leave the cave, or when Hume (1748/1999) proposed “the autonomous thought,” or when Nietzsche (1895/1999) defined “the superhuman,” or when Freire (1970/2005) proposed “the pedagogy of the oppressed.” The essential aspect of critical thinking in the post-truth era is the way in which news is presented to the audience. The viewers’ emotional struggles with the audiovisual content can only be resolved by asking critical questions, such as: what are the objective facts? What emotions have arisen in me by this objective “fact”, and are there any hidden intentions in the narrative that are meant to generate specific emotion? Fortunately, the Internet is still the universe of resistance in which viewers can search for and contrast information—a technology that allows us, despite the presence of the establishment’s media (the Davos Class) the opportunities to question “absolute truths” and autonomously develop shared critical thinking.

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