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The Digital Future of Facts

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El futuro digital de los hechos

ABSTRACT RESUMEN

The mediated world in which we live is essentially changing the way we explain, revive and build our perception of 'reality', facts, and news. The augmented and virtual reality, the artificial intelligence and the new techniques of Machine Learning or the robots and algorithms for content creation and recommendation, to name but a few technologies, already are part of the mechanisms that the media professionals have at their disposal. We are conscious of them or not, the audiences deal with them daily. These technologies profoundly transform the nature of the creation act of informative content, challenging our ability to critically analyze the massive amounts of information to which we are exposed daily, with new mechanisms of manipulation, impersonation, and influence, highly complex, that we must still assimilate.

El mundo mediatizado en el que vivimos está cambiando de manera fundamental el modo en que explicamos, revivimos y construimos nuestra percepción de 'la realidad', los hechos, las noticias. La realidad aumentada y virtual, la inteligencia artificial y las nuevas técnicas de Machine Learning o los robots y algoritmos de creación de contenidos y recomendación, por citar algunas tecnologías, ya forman parte de los mecanismos que los profesionales de medios informativos tienen a su disposición y con los que las audiencias, seamos conscientes de ello o no, lidiamos a diario. Estas tecnologías transforman profundamente la naturaleza de la creación de contenidos informativos retando nuestra capacidad para analizar críticamente la indigestible cantidad de información a la que estamos expuestos diariamente, con nuevos mecanismos de manipulación, suplantación, e influencia, altamente complejos, que aún debemos de asimilar.

KEYWORDS PALABRAS CLAVE

Deepfakes, Social Networks, Reality, Manipulation, Mediated Reality, Digital Media Literacy

Deepfakes, Redes sociales, Realidad, Manipulación, Realidad Mediatizada, Alfabetización de medios digitales

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The digital future of facts

At the end of 2016, *Oxford Dictionaries* (Oxford, 2016) chose the term “post-truth” as word of the year, in the midst of the debate about media manipulation on social networks during the US presidential campaign. It became clear from said campaign that, when serving a political purpose, facts are less influential in the digital public sphere than feelings and personal beliefs. And this new battle has only just begun: “humans’ primal quest for success and power – their “survival” instinct – will continue to degrade the online information environment in the next decade” (Anderson & Raine, 2017).

The media-driven world we entered a few years ago is fundamentally changing the way in which we explain and relive facts, news and even reality. Digital technologies reformulate and remediate our access to the content available to us so we can try and understand our reality by filtering, modifying and altering both the content and the nature of the communicative act. Augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, bots for creating content and recommendations, artificial neural networks and the interactive web, to name but a few, are already elements within the mechanisms available to media professionals against which audiences are battling every day—whether we realise it or not.

Extending or replacing the endless and complex dimensions of reality artificially through digital content is one of the most important phenomena and challenges being experienced by the media and by the field of communication in general, and this is also rethinking the epistemological point of the concept of reality (Soler-Adillon & Sora, 2018). In fact, this is our greatest challenge: that of the social construction of the story about truth. “Truth is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers. For every fact there is a counterfact and all these counterfactuals and facts look identical online, which

is confusing to most people.” (Kevin Kelly, co-founder of The Wired, as mentioned in Gray, 2017).

In today’s digital world, understanding reality is no longer a passive action, an act of faith where we consign the critical effort about truth to the media in which we place our trust. Approaching an understanding of the present today, through our digital world, requires at least two levels of critical action: one based on the digital activity of our networks and the other on direct action linked to our participation in exploring and creating new interactive news content.

The content we consume in the media and especially on the social networks we use to access news (which, in some countries, represents more than 50% of news consumption; Shearer & Gottfried, 2017) is the result of our own track record of action and selection. This is the controversial news echo chamber in which we exist and which is especially biased in some contexts, such as the political (“Echo Chambers”, Colleoni et al., 2014). Social networks also seem to be perfectly designed to create false states of opinion (Pennycook et al., 2018) and, by extension, of identities and personal emotions portrayed in a commercialised setting where advertising, marketing, news, entertainment and personal stories constantly combine in our immediate surroundings, alongside other, different realities.

These new information spaces urgently need our passive methods of reception to take on critical positions so we can evaluate this complex and constant flow of fake news spreading around the Internet much more quickly and effectively than real or actual news. In that regard, becoming aware that the digital news ecosystem is the outcome of our own track record is the first step we must take in our critical action, so we can become less detached from reality. This new thematic edition of **Hipertext.net** features two articles that analyse and



Image 1. Screenshot from the research project’s video demonstration, which can be accessed via the following web address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=30&v=9Yq67CjDqvw

respond to the issue of fake news: one by Patricia Maria Nigro and another by Sandra Álvaro. A third from Benson Rajan looks into how our identities are projected through our bodies, in what he calls a 'Mixed Reality' composed of society and social networks.

The considerable confusion caused by the online fake news phenomenon has been joined by a greater challenge based on new technological research that means real videos can be simulated and manipulated with a degree of perfection that is hard to question. Some recent experiments that make use of new Machine Learning techniques—the so-called Deepfakes—can replace a public personality's words with any others, while the deception remains barely noticeable. This can be seen in the work of Suwajanakorn et al. (2017) using archive images of Barack Obama (Image 1).

This technical resource is being widely used in action films to replace actors with digital avatars in dangerous scenes or even to bring actors digitally back from the dead (Atkin, 2018; Sora, 2018). When we use this resource in information systems, however, a great number of dangers and ethical challenges arise. Even so, progress seems unstoppable and while I write this editorial, I am also reading that the Chinese state news agency *Xinhua* has created the first artificial news presenter (Image 2) guided by AI-based algorithms, who will broadcast news 24 hours a day (Kuo, 2018).

The second important question for discussion is what we could call a "second level of critical action" by audiences in their understanding of news reality. Increasingly more digital content explains reality using digital platforms, transmedia initiatives, interactive documentaries, automated journalism and data mining (Haak et al., 2012), along with virtual reality immersive experiences (De la Peña et al., 2010). Most of these projects profoundly transform production ecosystems as well as the role of audiences, as they take on an active role in exploring the content, which is sometimes represented through active roles as the events being explained unfold.

In the projects undertaken by Nonny de la Peña, the driving force behind the so-called Immersive Journalism, viewers find themselves inside the simulation of real events: "The production of news in a form from which people can gain first-person experiences of the events or situation described in news stories" (De la Peña et al., 2010). In these types of projects, work on simulating the real no longer focuses on the credibility of the deception inside the synthetic image, which focused all efforts in the early stages of digital imaging (Manovich, 1995). Rather, the focus lies on the simulation and perceptual and physical deception of the 'real experience'. Over the coming years, these kinds of experiences—currently experimental and costlier in their production—will gradually be integrated into editorial departments and communication and information agencies, offering immersive projects to audiences as a way of explaining reality. Three texts in this edition of **Hipertext**.



Image 2. Artificial presenter. Chinese state news agency *Xinhua*. (Kuo, 2018).

net propose approaches to this second issue. Romualdo Gondomar talks about pragmatic experience as a methodological tool for analysing new social relations in digital media; Teresa Zaragoza and José Alberto García-Avilés discuss multimedia production experiences at the RTVE Laboratory; and Jorge Vázquez and Xosé López-García look at the consolidation of the interactive documentary as a new genre that reflects several different layers of meaning for representing a complex and polymorphic reality.

Giving audiences an immersive role inside the documentary experience or designing interactive news environments generates a new way of approaching information that questions the whole value chain of news-based social construction and the very experience of constructing reality. Some of the questions suggested by these new ways of telling reality might therefore include: What are the ethical and aesthetic implications of experiencing a representation of reality within reality? How does a viewer experience a news story in the first person? How does an immersive news act subject audiences to a greater or lesser degree of interrogation and questioning of the information with which they are presented?

In this new scenario for digital news and understanding reality, we no longer understand the 'virtual' and the 'real' as binary and opposing areas of thought and experience, with one concept linked to future possibilities and the other as unmitigable proof of the present. Rather, they are two concepts that mitigate each other and combine, overlapping on different digital levels. At the same time, the new ways of telling reality question the ontological act of understanding reality from a media-based point of view.

We have returned to the old debate about how photography initially came to represent refutable proof of reality (Bazin & Gray, 1960), only to later be understood as an artefact of subjective representation. Interactive and immersive audiovisual media are now another artefact of deception where any representation of reality in any context must be made subject to a meticulous show of scepticism. The future of digital news stories will be focused in the context of this challenge, but we must also remain open to the creative transformative poten-

tial provided by these new technologies for experimenting with new stories, creating new ways of approaching reality.

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