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Techniques of political communication in the era of infoxication and interruption: from storytelling to storydoing

Técnicas de la comunicación política
ante la era de la infoxicación y la interrupción:
del *storytelling* al *storydoing*

ABSTRACT:

Faced with a context saturated with information, where attention is a scarce commodity citizens demand actions more than speeches from their leaders. This social demand drives a crucial change in current political communication: the shift from *storytelling* (telling with words) to *storydoing* (telling with facts). Presidents, governors and mayors from all over the world are beginning to use this narrative technique that, through visual record, energizes wills and, in turn, provides them with credibility. The objective of this work is to give a theoretical framework —conceptualization, requirements, properties and uses— to this emerging communicational tool called *storydoing*.

KEY WORDS:

Storydoing; *Storytelling*; Credibility; Infoxicacion; Hypervisual culture; Facts.

RESUMEN:

Ante un contexto saturado de información, donde la atención es un bien escaso, la ciudadanía le reclama acciones más que discursos a sus líderes. Esta demanda social impulsa un cambio crucial en la comunicación política actual: el paso del *storytelling* (relatar con palabras) al *storydoing* (relatar con hechos). Presidentes, gobernadoras y alcaldes de todo el mundo comienzan a utilizar esta técnica narrativa que, a través del registro visual, dinamiza voluntades y, a su vez, les proporciona credibilidad. El objetivo del presente trabajo es brindarle un marco teórico —conceptualización, requisitos, propiedades y usos— a esta herramienta comunicacional emergente denominada *storydoing*.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Storydoing; *Storytelling*; Credibilidad; Infoxicación; Cultura hipervisual; Hechos.

1. Introduction

Covid-19 has shaped a new communicative age. The rise in virtual mode both for leisure and work, the progress of cognitive capitalism over industrial capitalism and, above all, the content saturation can be mentioned as some of the widespread phenomena which characterize this time. Pandemic sped up all these processes. Thus, changes which would have developed in years have taken place within a few months.

In a context in which accurate information —wearing masks, washing hands and social distancing— can save the lives of millions of people, the excessive circulation of content may become quite an issue. Risk communication given by governments and the field of medicine intertwines with statements that are unsupported by scientific evidence and fake news. Amidst this confusion lies the prosumer who, far from verifying neither precision nor source, spreads the message. This global scale communicative problem has been referred to as «infodemic» by the World Health Organization (WHO).

This infoxicación poses a challenge for current political leaderships. During the Covid-19 crisis, rulers around the world have had to display permanent communication about their management and, at the same time, put forward solid data which captivate social attention and allow them to stand out from information noise. All around the world, different narratives have been constructed to face coronavirus. On the one hand, narratives created entirely by words were developed, the so-called storytelling. The cases of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orban, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Rodrigo Duterte and, at the beginning, Boris Johnson, fall into this category. On the other hand, another type of narrative burst into in order to tell by means of concrete actions: storydoing. Among these government leaders are Justin Trudeau, Jacinda Ardern, Luis Lacalle Pou, Leo Varadkar, Erna Solberg, Tsai Ing-Wen, Angela Merkel, Katrín Jakobsdóttir and Sanna Marin.

Taking the latter category into account, the aim of this paper is to provide political storydoing with a theoretical framework. In order to achieve said aim, the following secondary objectives will be formulated: (I) Issue a description of the current communicative context; (II) conceptualize this narrative technique; (III) establish its requirements and characteristics; and, finally, (IV) prepare a typology which shows its different uses. As a closure, some brief conclusions will be drawn and some questions will be posed for future research.

2. Context: cyberdemocracy consolidation

Internet was the joint between communication and self-communication of masses (Castells, 2011). The web allowed the rise of the prosumer, an individual who consumes and creates contents (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). The vertical, unilateral and asymmetrical model, by means of which a journalist from *Cadena Ser* used to speak to a wide passive audience is replaced by a more horizontal, relational and symmetrical system, in which the audience has the possibility to become an active sender who amplifies, questions or resignifies the statements of the professional journalist by a tweet or a Facebook post. This new logic directly impacts on public opinion, which is democratized by incorporating a greater number of voices, but lacking clarity and consistency likewise.



Each minute, all around the world, millions of people create messages. This means that apart from being informed by the news spread by the mass media, there is also all the material created by citizens through their digital platforms. The outcome is an oversupplied communicational ecosystem loaded with devices, data and subjectivities. Academic writing and journalism have used different terms to condense this communicative process: «cacophony» (Dahlgren, 2005), «collapse in context» (Boyd, 2008), «permanent noise» (Gutiérrez Rubí, 2009), «infoxicación» (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014) and «mental obesity» (Naskar, 2019).

Likewise, this oversupply of information, together with the acceleration of communicative streams, has dramatically changed the citizen access to public opinion. While an individual is reading *Clarín* or *The Guardian*, for example, a LinkedIn notification may pop up and, at the same time, a Whatsapp message can be received. This synchrony interferes with concentration and promotes constant switch from one app to another. Due to this volatility, *The New York Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman (2006), pointed out that we were going from the «Information Age» to the «Age of Interruption.»

In the «Age of Interruption», attention is a scarce commodity. Nowadays, it is estimated that «our cognitive patience has four seconds to keep on reading an article from a website» (Gutiérrez Rubí, 2019: 78). Administrating this meager capital has reached such a degree that authors like Michael Goldhaber (1997) and Richard Lanham (2006) refer to the «attention economy». This concept summarizes the contradiction characterizing the cyberspace: whereas information is limitless, attention is limited. Such dilemma shapes the current digital market, in which great corporations depend on two resources: data and attention. The former enables to outline and microsegment content and, thus, attract the latter, which is the interest of the cybernaut.

The short time frame given by the browser to each post or piece of news has exerted impact on the grammar of the Web. Synthesis has become a must. Faced with fleeting attention, texts should be brief. The perfect example of this discourse economy is the social network Twitter, ruled by the administration of characters, not words. There is a lot to communicate in a little space. Taking into account the example of Donald Trump, Christian Salmon (2019) coined the military term «shock and awe» to represent the discourse which prioritizes headlines over complete texts, tactics over strategies and reaction over reflection.

Images are also cognitive shortcuts used to capture fleeting attention. This is so because the visual record has the capacity to consolidate a great amount of meaning within a short time frame. As the English researcher Darren Lilleker (2019) points out, in an era in which individuals are not willing to devote considerable effort to get informed, images are needed because they offer simple effective answers for facts. Messaris (2019) further states that the development of the visual media corresponds to the proliferation of smart phones with cameras, editing apps and sources given by the Internet which facilitate the access to images. In this era of the ubiquitous photography (Hand, 2012), several visual resources provided by social networks are included: emoji, stickers, memes and GIFs. Such pieces, which also work as cognitive heuristics, are causing political language to undergo a deep metamorphosis. Great narratives, with their maximalist symbology, ideological basis and collective anchoring, are replaced by personalized micro stories, structured by a daily, relaxed and horizontal aesthetics which aims to connect, by means of emotions, with postmodern individuals (Gerodimos, 2019).

Images are even more important after the rise of an individual who stands out because of their cognitive miser (Popkin, 1994). This means that, faced with the information tsunami that



they receive, individuals choose to put in the minimal mental effort to make a political decision or shape their opinion on a certain leader. Between the central route (meticulous processing of information) and peripheral route (superficial processing of information)¹, the latter prevails (Perloff, 2018). Researchers Lilleker and Liefbroer have explained this as follows:

Within this unregulated and uncontrollable communication environment, facts are leaky and all truths are arguable. Therefore, individuals need to resort to shortcuts and heuristics to determine to what extent a claim is more accurate than another. The logical conclusion is that when an individual is presented with highly contrasting arguments, it is increasingly likely that they would try to make quick evaluations based on instincts (2018: 353).

Finally, a word about significance of emotions in current communication. Social media have blurred the borders between public and private space. Intimacy is the main input in apps like Instagram, Facebook or Tik Tok. Representatives, mayors, leaders and presidents accept to show their privacy so as to reach to what Papacharissi calls «affective publics» (2016). These followers do not abide by public policies or the arguments of leaders, but they move after feelings related to the personal —not ideological— attributes of public figures. Thus, politicians strategically use their families, bodies, taste and consumptions. This is the step from public opinion to public emotion (Salmon, 2008).

To sum up, facing this cognitively petty individual, political communication starts to modify its *praxis* in three ways: intensification of segmentation and message delivery (the so-called «big data»); contents are shaped through the visual media and discourse economy; and, as it will be seen below, personal narratives are the core of communicative pieces.



3. Paradigm shift: from storytelling to storydoing

Whereas during the past two decades there has been a well-known interest in storytelling, this communication tool has existed since Ancient Greek. Searching how to move social sense by means of epic narratives was a common resource at the origin of Western culture. Thousands of years ago, battles, soldiers and leaders became achievements, heroes and myths that worked as the archetypes to which common citizens should aspire. As regards that, the Spanish theorist Enrique Gil Calvo explains:

Apart from this recent postmodern fashion, stories or electoral micro stories of «infotainment», it is true that narrative has always guided the exercise of political communication, starting by the Greek. Thus, we head back to the Athenian democracy analyzed by Aristotle, since this search of the emotional relation with voters, posed by the narrative marketing, is the same search of the ethos, understood as the emotional relation with the audience, which was explained as the key point of discourse rhetoric by the philosopher (2018: 123).

The fiction applied to common facts was fundamental to turn them mimetic, actions that future generations should reproduce. Therefore, the storytelling set up by narrators

1/ Psychologist Daniel Kahneman uses the categories «effort system» and «automatic system». The former refers to a slow cognitive work, elaborated and backed up by empirical evidence; the latter, on the other hand, is involuntary, fast and ruled by emotions.

was even more relevant than the facts themselves. Intentional choices, simplification, decontextualization, invention, omission and exaggeration were common activities among storytellers. Plausibility replaced truthfulness. The story had to include some real aspects to be believable, and that was enough. This is so because the «human mind is a stories processor, not a logical processor» (Haidt, 2019: 404). Although it deals with *post hoc* recreations, storytelling changes our mood. People who connect traumas or painful situations with success or later achievements are happier than those who have not experienced this resilience (McAdams, 2006). Besides, scientific studies in the United States have proven that when people listen to stories, they release oxytocin, the empathy and affection hormone (Brooks, 2019).

Argentine researchers, Orlando D'Adamo and Virginia García Beaudoux (2016) understand storytelling as a communicative technique used to build up political stories. The main elements of storytelling are as follows: three acts (beginning, middle, end) which order the story and give coherence; a protagonist with positive values who is a social role model; a challenge or an enemy that gives them suspense; and a moral which conveys a message to the audience. Amidst a context surrounded by information saturation, discourse economy, hypervisual culture and political representation crisis, the persuasive power of storytelling decreases. Society claims for forcefulness, facts and images. It demands the narrations of their leaders to be actions, not words. It is no longer about what Pedro Sánchez and Jacinda Ardern say, but about what they do. This is the epistemological turn from storytelling to storydoing carried out by political communication.

Even though some researchers and consultants —mainly from the corporate level— state that storytelling has become a superfluous technique (Montague, 2018; Weber, 2019) or that it is even «dead» (Vallance, 2016), it is important to explain that the text continues to be dominant and decisive in political communication. The innovation would be that communication of action is added. The objective is to achieve coherence between saying and doing. Synergy between both components, word and image, will create a strong narrative (Luntz, 2011). As Paul Martin Lester states: «The most powerful, meaningful, and culturally important messages are those that combine words and pictures equally and respectfully» (Lester in Gurri, Denny and Harms, 2010: 102).

Since it is quite a recent term, there aren't many conceptualizations as regards storydoing. From corporate communication, Baraybar Fernández and Luque de Marcos have given the following definition:

...a proposal to generate content in the process of construction and management of brands, based on creating products, services and experiences that could be perceived as measurable value by society. It appears as an alternative to the loss in efficiency of previous formulas in the current context, and it invites the organizations to reflect on their meaning and contribution to community, to review their history, their products, their way of communicating and, probably the most important, to specify their purpose (2018: 452).

Bearing in mind that this paper is framed within the field of political communication, storydoing shall be defined as a narrative technique which, by means of the visualization of actions or experiences, moves social sense and, at the same time, increases credibility and legitimacy of the political leader. This conceptualization seems applicable for the following



reasons: (a) it moves the social sense, because it activates the citizenship energy through example and coherence; (b) increases credibility, because it communicates through truth (the facts themselves) and not from plausibility (narration of facts); and (c) legitimacy, because it grants authority without coercion or threat thereof.

Beyond the changes that according to social, political and cultural context, political *storydoing* may present, it is suitable to point out some fundamental requirements and characteristics:

- It is in first person. It may be singular (I) or plural (we), but the leader shall always be part of the story. The storyteller and the protagonist shall be the same person. This implies a considerable difference with storytelling, whereby the leader could tell the story and capitalize third-parties' success. Kerry Smith and Dan Hanover (2016) state that the objective is to customize the experience, appropriate it, without neglecting the fact that a great audience must be reached.
- The message shall convey action, not passivity. The political leader shall be performing the play, not watching it. This centrality is important because pictures that transmit action cause a greater affective resonance in people (Goossens, 2003). The reputation of a politician or a company will be determined by the sum of their actions (Montague, 2018).
- The registry is visual. People give more credibility to pictures rather than text. Visual media «creates the illusion that we are gazing out of a window at the real world» (Gurri, Denny and Harms, 2010: 102). When we are in front of a photography, our critical sense is relaxed and we do not ask ourselves about its editing (color manipulation, for example), the choice of the operator (criteria to choose this option) and the frame (from which angle the picture was taken and which elements were left out from the field of vision). Besides, photos and audiovisual contents synthesize information: they can gather a great amount of meaning within a short time frame. This attribute is important in a context limited by attention economy and discourse fragmentation.
- It represents a social demand. The communicative fact has to respond to a public policy, expectations or feelings demanded by citizens. The leader must connect with the context in which they develop their public work. It is compelling that they connect with the rational needs and, specially, with the emotional desire of their surroundings. As Papacharissi (2016) states, in order to form a collective identity in the digital age, the affective dimension of politics is a key issue. Each action shall entail one value: honesty, braveness, equality, modesty, solidarity, perseverance or dignity, to name a few. So, the message turns mimetic, people try to copy and reproduce it in their lives.
- An opponent or an explicit challenge. Like storytelling, *storydoing* has an antagonist which, as Denning (2008) indicates, may be individual (Donald Trump, Nicolás Maduro or Marine Le Pen) or generic («populism», «poverty», «corruption», «imperialism», etc.) However, the important thing here is that the story is always structured throughout a dichotomous conflict between good and bad, which enables the interpretation of reality.
- Own symbology. The action shall have an exclusive, innovative and differentiating network of signs. Symbols compress meaning, activate emotions and facilitate understanding (D'Adamo and García Beaudoux, 2016). In this dimension, elements such as stage, clothes, gesture, music, icons, flags, and colors, among others, come into play.



- Sequence and causality. The story needs to have a cardinal value which organizes it and a three-act sequence (beginning, middle, end) that provides it with narrative tension. Also, for the purposes of coherence, the passing from one stage to another shall be conducted with a cause and effect logic. Lastly, there must exist a governing plot which organizes the diverse storydoing made by the leader. Each communicated action must be linked to the previous one. The lack of this consistency will make the politician lose accuracy.
- Full attention. People transit the current communicative ecosystem with a continuous partial attention (Ellen, 2010). This means that they are on «autopilot» when facing the great amount of information received daily. They fly over the constant stimulus arriving from different formats and only stop at those messages which impact them emotionally. At that point, incomplete attention turns into full attention. Due to its formal (visual and dynamic) and substantial (original and personal) characteristics, the storydoing should be one of those communicative pieces that manages to active full concentration.
- Memorable. Lastly, one significant feature is its mnemonic power. An efficient storydoing leaves marks in the minds of individuals. It is an easily remembered experience and, over time, it turns into information or guidance so that people make decisions in their own lives, such as voting or forming an opinion on politicians.

4. Storydoing typology

Different types of storydoing are described below. The objective is to show variations in this narrative technique with contemporary leaders. Although there may be endless uses, the most frequent are presented.



- Close. In a society that demands coherence between public and private spheres, politicians open the doors of their houses and, relaxed, show their privacy. A clear example is Uruguayan former president José Mujica, who gave interviews to worldwide journalists in his farm in Rincón del Cerro. By means of this storydoing, he showed a simple, humble and modest lifestyle. Another recent case is Mette Frederiksen, Denmark Primer Minister, who uploaded videos to her social networks showing how the highest authority of the country was living in quarantine at home. A trending video in cyberspace shows the social democrat leader singing Danish rock classics such as *Vågner I natten* or *Waking up in the night* while cooking.
- Inaugural. The leader takes action and deactivates collective fear or prejudice on a certain topic. A straightforward example is New York governor, Andrew Cuomo, who took the swab test to learn if he had Covid-19, during a press conference. In that way, he proved that it was a simple harmless process and led the way for the citizens to take the test. Further back, the examples of Manuel Fraga and American ambassador Biddle Duke can be mentioned. They took a bath in Almería to prove that, despite the nuclear bomb at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, the beach could be enjoyed harmlessly. This storydoing was carried out in order to promote tourism, one of the major industries in Spain.

- Horizontal. This type of storydoing aims at creating sympathy between the leader and citizens by means of consumption, taste or popular routines. The challenge is to show that the president lives like the majority, not the minority. Angela Merkel doing the shopping in a supermarket like a common German citizen; Barack Obama with his Russian peer, Dmitri Medvédev, eating hamburgers at Ray's Hell Burger; Taiwan prime minister, Tsai Ing-wen, having lunch amidst a crowd in a traditional market; and former Argentine president, Mauricio Macri, decorating a Christmas tree, are clear examples.
- Professional. The leader shows that, despite holding important public office, they have time to develop their lifelong job. This attempts to show that power hasn't changed them and, at the same time, to block the bureaucratic politician stereotype. Instead, an educated, qualified and competent person, who dedicates themselves to public function part-time, is shown. Argentine president, Alberto Fernández, giving classes at the Law School of the University of Buenos Aires is a perfect example of this type of storydoing. Also, the example of Irish former leader, Leo Varadkar, can also be mentioned, who rejoined the medical register during Covid-19 pandemic in order to work at a hospital in Dublin. This triggered other retired colleagues to do the same.
- Athletic. Politicians try to make public opinion see that they are strong, vital and healthy by doing sports. This is one of the most frequent storydoing because of two reasons: its easy implementation and the popularity of physical activity in society. Bolivia former president, Evo Morales, playing football around the country; Spanish president, Pedro Sánchez, running at the gardens of the Palace of Moncloa; Peruvian former president, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski and his cabinet attending gym lessons at the Honor Patio of the Government Palace are clear cases.
- Dynamic. Leaders display their full agenda with obligations and responsibilities. Through social networks, they appear as active, energetic and decisive people all day long. They go from one commitment to the next one without pauses. This gives them transparency and a sense of duty. New Zealand prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, is a great exponent of this type of storydoing. Through Facebook Live or Instagram Live she explains how the day of the maximum authority passes. Sitting at the back seat of the official vehicle which transports her from one place to the other, she films herself and talks about the activity she has just done and explains the next one. The American former presidential formula, Barack Obama and Joe Biden, applied this storydoing several times. In fact, there is a video showing both leaders dressed with shirt and tie, jogging around the White House getting ready to face a day full of work.
- Leisure. The objective is to prove that, like any other citizen, the president or governor needs to rest and disconnect from work. Sanna Marin, Finland prime minister, and Katrín Jakobsdóttir, her Iceland peer, often use this storydoing when they communicate through social media a Sunday rest, a Christmas trip, a trekking around nature or a bar outing with friends. It is worth mentioning that they always choose towns or shops characteristic from their own countries to promote tourism and local food. This indicates that, even during breaks, politics continue.
- Juxtaposition. Visually contrasting two political options with facts guarantees the content memorization (Lilleker, 2019). This is so because differences between right and wrong become evident. Lincoln Project, a platform run by republicans dissatisfied with



Donald Trump administration, issued a juxtaposition spot in which images of Joe Biden running effortlessly overlap other images of Trump walking with severe difficulties. At the end of the video, the former vice-president is shown seamlessly grabbing a glass of water to drink and then, the 45th American president can be seen trying to weakly bring a glass of water to the mouth with both hands. The closing shows a sign that says «Biden President. He can run and drink water.» The contrast is evident: the democrat candidate to the Oval Office is strong while the republican is weak.

Lastly, it is necessary to point out that the most effective storydoing is that shared by the citizen. This means that it is not communicated through the leader official channels but it is sent by common neighbors. In this way, self-propaganda is avoided and the message credibility increases. In cyberdemocracy, it is essential for prosumers to be the protagonists in shaping the image of the politician. The story must be «written» between citizens and the leader, with communicative ascending flows (bubble up, from society to leader) and descending flows (top down, from leader to society). Even though the communicative piece may not comply with all the technical and aesthetic techniques of a professional product, its amateur or handmade look will provide the politician with spontaneity and legitimacy.

5. Conclusions/Discussion

The aim of this work was to provide political storydoing with a theoretical framework. To achieve said objective, a conceptualization of such was made. With corporate communication as reference, it was defined as a narrative method which, by means of facts, can activate wills and provide the political leader with credibility and legitimacy. The difference with storytelling is that, while this one is exclusively based on words, storydoing narrates with facts and words. After that, its main requirements and characteristics were mentioned. For a communicative piece to be regarded as storydoing, it must be active, optical, original, memorable, sequential and able to activate people's full attention. To close this theoretical approach, a typology of storydoing was outlined, in which the following uses were pointed out: close, initial, dynamic, athletic and professional.

Several questions are posed for future research. One of them is to distinguish how storydoing changes according to the social network chosen. To which extent is format and content altered if it is communicated through Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok? Another possibility would be to discover the function that text serves in political storydoing, whether its task is rhetoric or related to contextualization. In an era signed by mass autocommunication, it would also be appropriate to analyze how society participates in the construction of storydoing. In other words: observe if citizenship only replicates the content issued by politicians or, by contrast, if it plays an active role in creating photography or videos and inserting them in the communicative ecosystem. Lastly, it would be interesting to connect storydoing with leadership staging, that is to say, which role space and time coordinates play in the story attempting to project.



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