

## Image and Post-Truth

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, under the non-stop assault of over-information and the multitude of sources and media, the consumers of information (related to non-fiction audio-visual content) suffer from an overflow. They are oversaturated, blasé, disinterested, they have the feeling they know everything and are entitled to jump straight to conclusion (their own or ready-made conclusions). The content they cannot process is rejected. With such an audience, content creators diversify their arsenal of stimuli: shocking images and sound, partisan speech that confirms the viewer's own perceptions and beliefs. But mostly, emotions. Emotion is the most powerful stimulus applied to the viewer and has an enviable effect among content creators. The emotionally connected viewer will develop trust, dependence on the source of information and, in conjunction with other stimuli, will become susceptible to mobilization. It is a key effect in the study of disinformation and propaganda, which makes it possible to manipulate the viewer into acting in a certain way. In other words, emotion becomes a tool. It is used intentionally to trigger a certain reaction from the audience. Our research analyses the extent to which the need for emotion in the news shapes reality, that is the events as they happened, and how we would expect them to be covered on screen. We follow the methods that journalists use to give viewers as much of this stimulus as possible, once considered a foreign body in the news bulletin. And in the analysis of the media content (image and sound) we notice how two fields that once seemed utterly opposed by reference to objective reality (physical truth), journalism and artistic creation (fiction), ended up sharing a common ground, that of emotion. The corpus of our analysis consists of CNN, BBC and RT television reports on the war in Syria during two of its key moments, the WMD attacks of 2013 and 2018. The study method we will apply is rhetorical analysis, proposed by Professor Guillaume Soulez from the University of Sorbonne. This is how we reach a second junction, because the French professor proposes discursive analysis for any kind of media content, whether fictional or not.

**Keywords:** Post-truth; image; emotion; propaganda; manipulation; news; consensus engineer; chemical weapons.

News is, in our view, the specific representations of reality that are based on facts and statements, delivered by journalists as truthfully as possible. To attempt a nonsubjective approach to news, journalists make a

clear distinction between opinion journalism and information journalism, i.e. news itself. As such, the information has to be delivered in an objective manner, it has to be a balanced rendering of facts for all parts involved in a conflict, so that the audience, like a judge, should have free access to the ideas being debated and decide which side they are on.

Impartial, objective journalism was authorized at the time of the invention of the telegraph and first press agency foundation, in the late 19th century. Out of financial reasons, i.e. to attract a larger number of subscribers, press agencies were forced to present the news so it would be convenient to all audiences. In the lines to follow, we will understand that this was not an easy process and that it proved almost impossible to be carried through while at war.

These days, under the pressure of over-information and the numerous sources and media, the information consumer shows little interest in news, feels (s)he knows everything and rejects all information (s)he does not understand. Confronted with such audience, TV broadcasters use a series of stimuli: shocking information and images, partisan discourse that acts as the audience's confirmation of personal emotions and perceptions and huge amounts of excitement that involve the viewers emotionally. Viewers are deeply involved in a love or hate process. Televisions no longer inform; they form perceptions and opinions. The TV reality is distorted by journalists to meet the audience's expectations.

Our research focused on the extent to which news emotion distorts reality, i.e. the events as they really happen. We inspected the approaches used by journalists to offer the audience the amount of emotion they would expect, that were once rejected from all news programmes. Journalists use a complex mechanism that is based on the important role of social media in the augmentation of consumerism and, implicitly, the audience's emotions. We also examined the way in which multiplied viewership images can form or transform the public opinion.

The context of our research was provided by the complicated Syrian war which involved several belligerent parts, many political interests and the eternal moral issue of war: is there anything more important than stopping human suffering? We compared the CNN, BBC and RT broadcastings that were considerably different in approaching the Syrian issue.

For the present article, we used the most dramatic report of our research, that was emblematic as a BBC production and was shot at the fighting site. The production used very few images provided by the rebels.

A major event at the beginning of 21st century, the Syrian war broke out 11 years ago as a reaction to the Arab Spring in the Middle East. Inspired by the wave of popular rebellions against dictatorial regimes in Tunis, Libya and Egypt, the students of the Damascus University started a resistance

movement against President Bashar al-Assad. Their communication and gathering together were helped by images spread through social media networks. As the conflict escalated (several organizations, countries and armies joined the rebels), the broadcast images started to play a more powerful role in drawing universal attention upon the event, mostly by gaining the sympathy and support of international community. These images, that were spread at first only on social media and were subsequently diffused by the Syrians from all over the world, presented the war from within. At first glance, they may be considered the best images a reporter can get as they show the events as they unfold: a bomb is seen exploding, a barrel of chemicals is thrown from a helicopter, an airplane launches rockets, corpses are torn apart or burned, bodies are covered in blood, dying people cry for help, desperate parents run away carrying their bleeding babies in their arms, confused children run out of school during classes, a hospital is full of dying people, lots of funerals, white shrouds for the dying people, large shrouds, small shrouds for dead children, killed by the cruel enemy. These are part of the countless images the Assad regime and the anti-government rebels tried to gain international sympathy by.

At the beginning of the war, such images pervaded Middle East social media and militant TV broadcasts on Syrian conflict, provided entirely by reporters. There were many cases in which the same images were used differently in accordance with the position taken by a certain television.

The images taken by rebels or Syrian militaries share a number of characteristics:

- They seem very real as they present unfolding events, the filming uses the “cinéma vérité technique”, the images are slightly shaken to make the viewers feel the reporter’s emotion, the camera records without interruption and the events are presented with no mounting. The message of such techniques is that the reporter, that captures apparently useless images, is so impressed himself that he is confused about what to record first.

- The reporter involves the viewer in the events as he gives comments in a low or very loud voice according to the dramatism of the event.

- At times, the reporter becomes a character himself. He turns the camera on himself, makes comments on the events and asks for help. The technique is identical to that of the stand-up practiced by journalists.

- The characters of the so-called war reports, the victims or their rescuers, the fighters or the civilians caught in the middle of the events, show a specific behaviour that is amplified by the camera; they look straight into the camera (they talk to the audience), they make certain gestures to show suffering, they cry out loud and sometimes ask for the international community’s help: stop the killing!, what are you waiting for?, do you need more proofs?.

- In some cases, as we will notice when analysing a few reports, such examples will appear rudely truncated and strangely inserted among the images filmed by professional reporters. The reason for such instances is the augmentation of the viewer's emotion. Otherwise, there would be no explanation for mixing up professional reports with amateur reports that are questionable in terms of truthfulness. The main question that now arises is: should war reporters search only for truth and the means of revealing it? Or should they use whatever means to impress the viewers?

Such reports were deliberately avoided by big broadcasters such as CNN, BBC and Euronews until August 2013, a critical month in the Syrian War when a first chemical weapon attack on anti-government rebels was registered. A number of scenes of unknown source were yet to be found in the BBC report that we will analyse in the lines below.

First of all, a few words on the main role of the image in the post-truth context. Basically, a cognitive passive receptor turns into a spectator. Therefore, the main way to deliver him content and meaning is through images, not texts. As such, the definition of post-truth used by Prof. Lee McIntyre from MIT<sup>1</sup>, contains the idea of passive *cognitive waiting* when people have better reactions to emotions and beliefs than to arguments and proofs. Reacting involves the presence of stimuli and its effect means action, change, a process that cannot take place without stimuli. The definition also explains the nature of efficient stimuli. The human being is receptive to feelings (emotions) and confirmation of beliefs that he develops in time because of getting in touch with other people's beliefs. Take, for instance, the TV talk shows or the monologues in vlog productions on social media (mostly on TikTok) in which only beliefs count, not facts or proofs.

The image, mostly the cinematographic image, has a powerful effect on the human brain. A series of studies on the psychology of perception focused on the subjects' reaction to various static images (inside and outside a room): photos, posters, ads (with images and texts or only with texts) as well as to moving images (cinematographic). Confronted with all these visual stimuli, the subjects' attention was invariably attracted to the moving images. Nowadays, this effect is amplified by the new image rendering devices. Electronic devices with incorporated light sources (LCD, LED or OLED screens) are more attractive to the eye than the projected light such as the classic cinema light projection on a white screen in a dark room.

The frequent consumption of images produces a series of effects that are very similar to addiction. Any other means of delivering information becomes secondary to watching moving images and the consumer will get addicted to it. He will use it repeatedly, ignoring all other means. Then, the

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<sup>1</sup> Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, Boston, MIT Press, 2019, p. 5.

image addiction will develop specific mechanisms that are opposed to critical thinking. The Italian politologist Giovanni Sartori, who wrote the essay *Homo Videns. TV Brainwashing*, noticed that the generations that watch TV very often tend to be more superficial than those whose education is based on reading and writing. The new generations, whose first contact is with moving images and later with written texts and the need to understand them, are no longer capable of using abstract notions. Therefore, an important aspect of the post-truth state is that people, who get their education from watching images and not from reading, develop a different relation to truth.

The video addicted have less critical sense compared to those who use abstract meanings. By losing our capacity to use abstract notions, we also lose the capacity to make the distinction between true or false.<sup>2</sup>

On August 29, 2013, BBC World broadcasts a complex report<sup>3</sup>, that contains scenes shot just after the attack, a post factum record of the place where a bomb fell, when the reporter presents the unfolding events with scenes from the hospital and the arriving burnt victims. Except for the first 30 seconds of the report, which are amateur filming, the rest is filmed by BBC reporters. The hospital scenes were shot on the site and leave no doubt as to the truthfulness of the event, being documented by professional journalists.

The report is hard to watch. The details are terrifying; there are many wounded people, children included. If the report had been broadcast in Romania, the NCA (National Audio-visual Council) would have fined the company as it did when the first images of the Collective tragedy were presented on TV. The Romanian broadcast law requires that televisions blur shocking images, such as wounds, and protect the minors' identity. Showing suffering or wounded people is an unjustified action that can deeply harm the viewers emotionally. Besides, the Romanian broadcast law stipulates that every minor that is placed in a degrading situation should be protected and filmed from the back or with a blurred face.

The report begins with images filmed by rebels just after the bombing, accompanied by a voice heard in the background. One man handles a blanket to another to cover the dead body of a child. The images are hard to decipher as they are very shaky, they are poorly shot and the filming angle seems to have been chosen to protect the participants, as their faces are completely hidden. The scenes look more like amateur filming by someone with a phone hanging on his neck. It is characteristic for rebel filming and it is tense,

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Sartori, *Homo Videns. TV Brainwashing*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Pannell; Darren Conway, *Syrian Crisis: Incendiary Bomb Victims 'like the walking dead'*, "BBC News", 29 August 2013, retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-23892594>

terrifying, horrifying. To augment the viewer's perception, the voice in the background is heard saying how undignified death is in Syria.

We are eventually informed that the voice belongs to the school headmaster who lets the BBC journalists in to show them the remains of the building after bombing. However professional the filming may look (images are clearer and the camera does not shake), the filming angle has not been changed. The viewers see only the legs and the back of the headmaster. However, the reporter specifies that the headmaster does not want to be seen. This piece of information makes the spectator understand that the area is risky and the headmaster may be in danger. The report turns more emotional because it makes the viewer feel as if he were in the middle of the events himself. Besides its practical reason of filming the inferior part of the body, forcing the viewers to look only down has a powerful effect as it gives them the impression that some unknown and unusual being makes him do this. Usually, you will look up in such unexpected situations, to see as much as you can. The perception imposed on the viewer is that the opponents of the Damascus regime themselves are forced to bend down and hide in the underground; they have to obey and be humble. Moreover, is there a worse thing than an undignified death?

The viewers are presented scenes with the victims' belongings: a man's shoe in the ashes, a girl's shoe, and the emotional shock. These may be even more impressive than seeing a dead body. No words, just the two shoes and the spectator's imagining how they were lost when their owners, that are no longer alive, were running in terror.

The school headmaster describes the horrific scene and points to the burnt bodies of the children lying on the floor. The huge hole left by the bomb becomes more visible when the headmaster approaches it. In addition, the large black mark on the classroom wall it left when falling. Definitely, there has been a fire there.

Reporter Ian Pannell marks the location. He makes an explanatory stand-up and a sensorial connection to the site of the tragedy. He mentions he cannot identify the content of the bomb, but that he can still smell the chemicals it contained. He appeals to the spectator's senses and makes the latter see what he hears and believe it is real, it is the only truth. Consequently, after all these preparations, the spectator is emotionally ready for the events to come.

The reporter confirms this strategy of obtaining gradual emotion and informs them about what is to come. He adds that the view is hard to describe.

An important observation is that of Ian Pannell's who explains why the firing bomb was directed towards a school. The government airplanes

fly at a low altitude and search for crowded places with large gatherings of people/rebels. Bombs were launched on people queuing for bread or shopping in the market. Apparently, the day of the bombing too many children were allowed to play in the schoolyard. The reporter now has the opportunity to explain how things happened and who the person responsible for that was, namely the pilot. The viewers need someone to blame at this point. The brain, which is engaged in processing strong feelings and much information, is looking for an end. The question everybody is asking is: who was capable of doing such a thing? Ian Pannell answers that by saying: "What a horrible thing for a pilot to do!"

As negative feelings start to build up, the spectators are shown horrific scenes: the victims of the attack arrive at the hospital, half-naked or in shreds, badly wounded, with torn skin, looking more like ghosts. With raised arms and in shock, they head for the hospital in search for help, all passing in front of the camera. The scenes are terrible and Ian Pannell's voice is heard once more in the background saying "They arrived like the walking dead". (This was later used by other TV broadcasters.) The implications of his words are both cultural (religious) and emotional: people looking like ghosts, walking dead, hell-like atmosphere, a reminder of the place where Christians think people get tortured after death, losing their soul. The effect is that of fear, resentment and anger. At this point, the viewers' only wish is to see the guilty get punished.

The peak of terror is reached when a shaking 15-year-old boy is showed on TV. He is alone and nobody seems to care for him. He is in shock and he looks around as if calling for help or straight into the camera as if addressing the viewers. The message is thus made clear: the spectator is no longer a witness; he becomes part of the tragedy. He has to do something for the boy. The boy does not cry or complain, he does not beg for attention. He has a dignified attitude. However, he is obviously in a bad condition, he has been badly burnt. The BBC journalists use the situation to deliver a political message; they use the child's suffering, who stands with arms reaching out while the reporter explains in the background that most countries forbid firing bombs in civilian areas and yet, he goes on, „Ahmed's government has not signed the treaty". The audience finds out now that the boy's name is Ahmed and that his government is guilty for his situation; the attention is drawn from his tragedy to ending the Syrian conflict.

The message becomes even more obvious when the helpless suffering boy's scene is instantly followed by a rebel's political message. An angry man appears on screen, he is dissatisfied with UN and the international community that do not take any action against Bashar al-

Assad and do not protect the civilians. In a loud voice, he asks the entire world not to remain indifferent to the Syrian tragedy. The BBC filming looks very amateurish, with close-ups and gros plans, harsh words and loud voices. It is definitely intended to have a strong impact on the audience that are still in shock and do not know what to make out of all information. They need to calm down first, but they are delivered more information and they start to feel guilty. Then guilt turns into dislike, anger and hatred. The emotional manipulators have clearly completed their task.

The question that arises at this point is whether the BBC report could have been presented in a different manner and if the impact on the audience would have been the same. In many TV editorial offices, as is the case of Romania too, the usual trend is to use the most shocking images in the news reports as a start, to impress the audience and make them watch the report or newscast. As such, the BBC report should have started with the hospital images, followed by the stand-up of the school the bomb had fallen on. But this approach would have had less emotional impact on the audience. The viewers would have lost interest in the report soon after it had started and no message of compassion would have been delivered to them.

This analysis was oriented towards two directions:

1. Reporting – narrating facts, their logical progress and the relationship between content and objective truth (that can be sustained). That was the reason I offered detailed examples of the events presented in the productions I chose to analyse. The images were intended to be rhetorical analyses.

2. Also, image language with artistic features that was not focused on truth-telling. It was intended to create emotion as a response to the story and not to the events, out of the war context, not interested in pointing out the guilty or in using any of the habitual reporting mechanisms. I was interested only in conveying emotion and meaning at the same time.

In other words, our study focused on two dimensions: the rhetoric and the poetics of images.

The conclusions of the rhetoric analysis pointed out the ideology of the editorial offices. In the Western countries, the audience was not affected by the suffering of the Syrian people at first. The latter were thought to be far from them, and the rebellion against the Damascus dictator was of no interest to the West. However, by presenting the horrifying scenes on TV, the event started to become part of their lives and, with the many refugees coming, the Europeans realized how close the Syrian war was to them.



At an emotional level, I noticed that the viewers of the above reports experienced a myriad of feelings, some of them being very surprising, such as guilt or happiness (the Digi24 perception experiment showed that the subjects were happy because they were convinced they would never be affected by the Syrian war as it was taking place far from Romania). But besides these odd aspects, the images of the terrible acts in the Syrian war are emotionally shocking, going from terror, compassion, sadness, hatred to disgust for Bashar al-Assad. The last affective reaction counts for the consensus creator because disgust makes the viewer want to act, rebel against or put an end to the source of his anger, namely the criminal Damascus regime.

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