To End All Good News: Emotive Opinionatores, Arrogant Experts, and Group Ideologues[1]

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Abstract

In this paper I will be dealing with two major arguments: a) an emancipated thinking is not just one that liberates itself from the baseless authority of others, but also and fundamentally one which is known to subject itself to patient self-criticism, persistent deepening and intricate dialogue with different perspectives; such a way of thinking is menaced by the impoverishment of the use of language in contemporary media b) along with the technical question of how to transmit information products more and more rapidly, we need to develop a symmetrical concern for the development of critical points of view, of reasonable approaches to the problems, of prudent scepticism, illustrated pessimism and meditative prudence.

Key words: Information; Language; Meaning.

1. The emotive opinionator, the arrogant expert and the group ideologue

The famous Portuguese contemporary writer Gonçalo M. Tavares captured quit well a crucial feature of our contemporary *media*:

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It is not the discourse of thought (to reflect before conclud-
ing) that it is an event and something newsworthy. It is the
opposite: the discourse that concludes, and much so, before
thinking. Why think if I can conclude? Ninety-five per cent of
the language of public space that is reported could today have
this motto (Tavares, 2018: 7).

I would like to start by arguing that this state of affairs seems to me
favoured by three standard figures who tend to colonize 'the language
of our contemporary public space' with quick and childish opinions ('like
it' / 'don't like it'; '), with fast conclusions silencing the complexity of
all problems ('in fact, it all comes down to…'), and with the inability to
recognize at what point it may be good to suffer the consequences of
truth (or the search for truth). I would name these three type-figures
as follows: the *emotive opinionator*, the *arrogant expert* and the *group
ideologue*.

The *emotive opinionator* is the type-figure that represents all
those who just care about 'spontaneous' opinion and scandalized or
euphoric synthesis based on an impoverish use of language. The *emo-
tive opinionator* is thus someone convinced of his own importance, or
better yet, of the importance of his own feelings and emotions. These
feelings and emotions are to him (or her) the only way suitable of look-
ing of looking for the 'truth' in events and actions, not reason or rea-
sonable arguments. There is, of course, a scale of *emotive opiniona-
tors.* At the bottom we have the internet *hater*; on the top we can find
those who comment on everything and everybody based on the single
bases of how something 'was lived' by themselves. The *emotive opin-
ionator* is someone convinced of his own wonderful sensibility and col-
ourful interior. For him, empathy is the most important value as it rep-
resents the path to wisdom. What is felt is therefore the only needed

criteria on which to ground a worldview. Such a figure-type thus symbolizes all those who disregard the importance of rational conflicts of interpretations, of critical, decentralizing and heterodox arguments, of subtle, nuanced and complex interpretations. In this sense the views of the *emotive opinionator* represents an impoverish point of view that tend to ignore the complexity and temporal long significances of the world we live in.

In fact, reality is always distorted by the monotonous and simple projection of fears, interests, resentments, 'sensations' and uncritical convictions. The opinion of the *emotive opinionator* is founded in an endless capacity to feel shocked and in the strong ability for impulsive reaction. Such a figure thus stands on the opposite field of those engaged in consistent and alternative narratives of meaning, in patient interpretations and long term research of new horizons of meaning. For the *emotive opinionator,* the only valid 'narratives' are those that reinforce his own sense of felling outraged. This is why reality becomes, for the *emotive opinionator,* an atomized sum of 'shocking situations' (real or manipulated, it does not matter), of 'ferocious injustices' and of episodic and *liquid* 'scandals' that are 'felt within' and, because of that, always 'lived' as an irrevocable appeal to activism and immediate reaction.

The first victims of the *emotive opinionator* are almost always the complexity of truth and the importance of emancipated thinking. An emancipated thinking is not just one that liberates itself from the baseless authority of others, but also and fundamentally one which is known to subject itself to patient self-criticism, persistent deepening and intricate dialogue with different perspectives. To some extent, the *emotive opinionator* represents the attitude of reducing all questions to just one 'How to immediately react to …?'

The second type-figure I would like to refer to is the one I would call the *arrogant expert*. By this designation I mean to refer to a paradigmatic figure that summarizes how specialized expertise tends to function as a powerful means of bureaucratic control of information. The arrogant expert (or 'expert-priest' as referred to by N. Postman [1993: 85]) can be identified by two main features: first, he tends to be ignorant of many issues that do not relate to his area of expertise, not suspecting that such ignorance can lead him to misrepresent reality by over-simplification; on the other hand, when the recognition of the limits of a specialized field would advise caution in extrapolations, the *arrogant expert* is the one that claims the authority to extend the presuppositions and methodologies of his own field of expertise to an ever larger set of domains of intervention (social, psychological, ethical, moral) that he mistakenly understands to be subsumed in the same way and to the some logic of his field of specialization.

The contemporary public space is full of these experts who intend to teach us a set of *technics* that supposedly will enable us to unveil all the secretes on, for example, how to educate children, how to be kind and empathetic, happy and sure of oneself, how to be healthy and beautiful, how to make love, how to influence others, how to lead them and also how to make friends, seduce, feel good in one's body, eat as one should, compete, succeed, take control, be virtuous, etc. In our days there does not seem to be any aspect of human relations and actions that escapes the control of one or another *arrogant expert*.

It is true that the 'expert' is an important creation of modern times. Modern times are an age of exponential increase of information and knowledge, with the consequence of having become impossible for a single person (as happened with encyclopaedic sages of the past) to hold more than a tiny part of the total set of human knowledge. To a certain extent, it is comprehensible that the expert would arise as a key figure of such times. He will be at the vanguard of a new way of

searching for knowledge that is now the only one possible and suitable: a specialized and compartmented way. The expert exhausts a determined and well circumscribed field of research and, in this sense, the way of working of the expert could be summarized in this way: scan all data; eliminate what does not relate to the set of questions in your specific field; use what's left to solve the problems of one specific field of research. This procedure has resulted well in many fields of knowledge, and the immense successes of specialized knowledge are not to be questioned. But there's a problem here:

> This process works reasonably well in situations where only a technical solution is required and there is no conflict with human aspects (...), but less well in cases where technical requirements may conflict with human problems (...) as in the case of laws, family life (...) personal development problems (Postman, 1993: 85),

or, indeed, any situation or decision that crosses the world of human meanings.

What is an expert on 'well-being'? What is an expert on 'empathy', or on a 'good live', or on being virtuous, or in 'making love'? Are such questions part of any (and just one) 'specialized field' of expertise? Are those questions solved by any technical solution? What is experienced as a 'problem' in such contexts? Is it just a *technical difficulty*? In fact, as in other similar cases, these are particularly complex problems that are born of even more complex phenomena that involve the very roots of a human way of being; in face of such problems, any attempt at technical simplification immediately represents an adulteration. The *arrogant expert* is precisely the one who better endorses such simplifica-

tions as he is unable to recognise the true rage of specialized and technical formulations, on one hand, and the non-technical fabric of the reality those questions point out, on the other.

The third type-figure who tries to control information by means of excessive simplification of human phenomena is what I would call the *group ideologue*. In my view, this is the representative of a new form of postmodern bureaucratization of thought, better characterized by the following twofold characteristic process: a process of establishing as a basis for dealing with any subject not the investigation of its root and foundations, of its complexity and incidences, but rather the statement of a point of view that is established, first and foremost, as a theoretical trench that urges to protect against all enemies; a process of impoverishment and simplification of phenomena and worldviews that follows directly from the inability to recognize that, on the other side of the trench, at least some points of view, opinions, theses, knowledge could eventually be useful to discover and think subtleties, nuances and heterodoxies of human phenomena.

The *group ideologue* is everywhere in our public space. This type-figure can easily be identified in all approaches, ideas and doctrines that strive to silence any points of view of *instable equilibrium* among different perspectives and interpretations. For such a ty-figure, it all comes down to a more or less blind defence of a single perspective, the rightful one that is one's own; such a defence is taken to be a kind of 'moral' defence of 'our good ideas', against the evil others that do not understand them and so are to be seen as a menace. The *group ideologue* is always an extremist, even if he is not prepared to see himself as such; in fact, he will always think of him as a kind of champion for pure ideas, when in reality he represents the censorship of *in between* perspectives, of complex and heterodox perspectives – those that are strengthen by the hermeneutic model of *reading* (see Ricoeur,

1986: 153 ss.). The group ideologue is then someone that makes 'certainty' depend on a perspective (his own) that is supported not on its merits or its compatibility with reality, but on the fact that it is necessary to protect it (by moral imperative) from insidious critics. The theoretical barricade of the group ideologue is thus strengthened by a process of victimization, which sees the opposite view as an attack. His prevailing sentiment is that of constant indignation, an essential feature of his impoverished mode of control over information and thought. Resentment becomes his way of life and utopia the only escape when reality contradicts the ideas seen as unique. That is why around the group ideologue it is impossible to think – even less to think differently: all those who call into question the 'beliefs' and 'ideas' of the group ideologue are immediately tagged as agents of evil; it is therefore not necessary to examine what they say and to evaluate any possible reasons they may have on common issues or concerns. Thus, the group ideologue's perspective on the world will always be marked by the inability to expose itself to the particularities, details and sensible alternatives that other 'views' can always convey.

Such a perspective will therefore always be too simplistic; its first victim will therefore always be the complexity of the problems and affairs of the human world, inevitably subject to a silent process of forced simplification and partial approaches.

2. The problem with sharing information

By making their hurried concluding schemas predominate over ever-widening areas of public space and, in particular, by colonizing the news media, such figures tend to amplify and reinforce the very same dismal symptom that causes them to have an audience: more and more people are losing their natural aptitude - their virtue, in fact - for scepticism, more and more people are letting their desire not to be deceived to became weaker and weaker, more and more people seem

to be forgetting the importance of informed and cosmopolitan citizenship, of vigorous knowledge, of up-to-date reasoning, of strong and beautiful ideas (the only ones that cam truly frame an broadly give sense and grounds to that knowledge and that reasoning). Here lies a second problem that needs to be analysed.

I would like to argue that, in order to meditate on such a state of things, we must face a fundamental problem which, more than ever before, calls us to think and not to conclude. Such a problem could be formulated in this way: is the only objective of 'information' to 'transmit' 'media contents'? Is 'information' only just another 'product', a desirable 'thing' one wants to have, a 'thing' without any connection to its possible uses, meanings, purposes and extended meshes of significance?

This problem has, in my view, a history that explains it: the history of an epistemological change that, during the nineteen century, will replace the central problem of information and communication, as it is inherited from the *grand siècle* of the enlightenment, by an essentially technical difficulty. That 'problem' was this one: how can information promote a critical, enlightened, sceptical, and innovative world view? The change occurred when, as it came to be forgotten the range and implications of that first problem, the 'problem with information' was exchanged by the 'technical problem' of how to transmit ever more quantity of information in an ever more rapid way to more and more people.

I want to argue that this change has serious repercussions, first and foremost, on the way we use language in the public sphere. When efficiency and rapidity becomes the only value surrounding information, language becomes less important in the sense that it must also respond to needs of rapid information. In order to serve this new purpose, the uses of language became increasingly simplified and impoverished; and as we simplify and impoverish language, we do the very

same thing to thought. At the end, the result is to became less demanding regarding both. A time where information becomes just another product of infinite and liquid entertainment, is a time of simplified and impoverished language and thought. And in such times everything can became easily believable…

Let us look at this issue more in detail.

It can be stated that one of the most relevant historical contributions from the *Enlightenment* (deepening a movement that takes shape along the end of the seventeenth century) to modern and contemporary culture is the defence and promotion of the value of free circulation of large flows of information (based on the printed word). The very possibility of such free and large circulation of information was favoured by a set of new *mediums* with a cosmopolitan, emancipatory and critical agenda committed to fighting the 'spirit of lies'. Newspapers are one of these new *media*. By the end of the century, newspapers had already assumed its modern form and proliferated by the majority of the great European cities. In this new context of the promotion of free circulation of information it is also worth mentioning another important medium: the *Salon.* Along the eighteenth century the *Salon* quickly becomes the social place *par excellence* of transmission and discussion of information about new technological inventions, new scientific and philosophical ideas, discoveries of distant shores, new geographies and social habits, agriculture, technology, medicine, philosophy, history, etc. A third medium can be added to this story: the *Académies* of research and teaching, which are established all over Europe (the Royal Academy, the *Académie des Sciences*, the *Académie* de Berlin, Copenhagen, etc) along the same period. The *Académies* came to provide a privileged network of exchanges for scholarly information and communication among the great European researchers, promoting the circulation of up-to-date knowledge. It would not be inappropriate to call this period 'the information age' (Postman, 2000).

But one important precision must be made regarding what was then understood as 'information'. In fact - and here is the point I want to stress out - the *Enlightenment* concept of information was quite different from what we know today: information was not a 'product'; on the contrary, it was understood as something that gained its value as it was able to endorse and promote extended and ground-breaking contexts of meaning, knowledge and reasoning about the world. In other words, information stood for the importance of gaining an 'educated' (an 'informed') socio-cultural and scientific world-view (Postman, 2000). In this sense (and in this historical context), the project of the *Encyclopedie* de Diderot and D'Alembert can be understood as a paradigmatic example of the Enlightenment's way of understanding information: informing is not only 'transmitting contents', but also, and above all, a way to promote the virtues of scepticism and the investigation of truth.

A clear change of this paradigm happens during the nineteen century, under the strong influence of a set of new machines that drastically increased the rapidity of information fluxes. It was, in a way, the fascination for this new means of communication that favoured the replacement of the 'problem with information' for the technical problem of 'quantity' and 'up-to-date' ways of sharing information.

Among these new machines, we must point out the telegraph. As L. Mumford (Munford, 2018: 259–260) clearly demonstrates, following the invention of the telegraph – rapidly followed by a series of other technological inventions dealing with information: the telephone, television, the internet with the proliferation of social media – the act of communication and sharing information reinstalls the idea of 'instant reaction peculiar to the face to face encounter between two persons', an idea that had been abandoned as it became clear the economizing virtues of the printed word (a telegram was more quick to convey the essentials of information then an emotional, long and tiring face-to-

face talk). The quickness introduced by telegraph, then by telephone, then by television, then by the internet will result in the separation of information from its broad uses and context; information becomes a 'thing,' a 'transactional good', 'something that one wants to have immediately', something that is desired as an end in itself; the only new 'difficulty' to be solved will thus be how to increase the amount and speed of information and how to get it to more and more people (the masses).

However, the substitution of the 'problem' of information as a way of sharing a worldview for the 'technical difficulty' of how to increase the quantity of transmitted information and the speed of such a transmission, is not without risks.

Two of these risks seem to me to be worthy of attention: first, the risk (in fact, a common danger of the use of all new technologies) that represents the 'tendency to use new technological innovations whether the occasion demands it or not' (Munford, 2018); secondly, the more serious rick which constitutes the reverse side of the convenience of instantaneous communication: 'the fact that the great (…) abstractions of writing, reading and drawing - the means of reflexive thought and deliberate action – tend to be weakened' (Munford, 2018: 260) and understood as not important in the direct reason of the neglect of broad contexts of deep and guiding horizons of meaning.

Let us insist on this topic. Take the example of the news media: when the 'language' of the news in the public space is predominantly worried with speed (the quick comment, the internet post, the 'reactions', etc.) is it not true that such a use will tend to overlooked, for instance, long documentaries or complex investigative reports? The way I formulate this question does not pretend to be a Manichean approach, nor do I intend to pursue here any kind of blind attack on media technologies. That, in my view, would be a naïve and unjustifiable po-

sition. The point I want to make here is not to suggest a kind of resentful opposition between 'our days' and' the good old days' (which never existed); nor do I aim at any banal criticism of the 'society of consumption' as the responsible for the 'consumption' of information and the obliteration of a more authentic 'lost reality'. This are, in my view, nonsenses. What interests me here is to think about what is lacking (not necessarily as an alternative, but as what is 'missing') to a world seen through the impoverished and detached 'language' of prompt and quantifiable fluxes of information.

To begin with, it must first be acknowledged that the gains brought to human communication by the new technologies of communication and information are immense: under its effect, new opportunities arouse that increased the range of possibilities for human exchanges of knowledge, experiences and projects. Along such a process new ways of making others closer and more familiar, of strengthening interpersonal connections and intersubjective skills, of democratizing access to culture and knowledge, of reinforcing the proximity between governors and governed, of increasing civic and political awareness, of enriching the social fabric, of creating new places of freedom in the public space - all of this and more became possible The problem is that one of the implications of the new information technologies, that make information a product for fast consumerism, is the 'creation' of an atomized world, detached from any frame of deep significances, long meanings and stable shared beliefs. Quickness and short-term contents parcel and equalize all kinds of events (the 'alignment' of news, the daily 'alignment' of 'shares', post, etc. are the most visible symptoms of this). That is to say that in such a way *time* becomes an 'eternal present', a monotonous present, a 'here and now' without articulation or reference to any enlarge and complex guiding worldview – not, of course, in a propagandistic or ideological sense, but in the sense the

spirit of the *Enlightenment* presupposed it: inform to fight the lies; inform to form for emancipated arguments; inform to hearten political disbelief; inform to practise the capacity of feeling fascinated by patient interpretations.

Here is what, in my view, remains to be done: to reintroduce, along with the technical question of how to transmit information products more and more rapidly, the need to develop a symmetrical concern for the development of critical points of view, of reasonable approaches to the problems, of prudent scepticism, illustrated pessimism and meditative prudence. Whence a possible thesis can be, in a provocative way, advanced here: maybe the true benefits of using new information technologies will only arise when – and if – those new technologies are taken up by a refinement of culture and personality that equates technological developments (Munford, 2018: 261) and broadcasting of informative 'products'.

3. Final remarks

More institutions – along school and university – should be concerned with the need for such 'necessary refinement', another way of naming the challenges of a much need new consistent model of education. All this has, in fact, to do with education as it is becoming clear the need to enable new generations to recognize misinformation, distinguish true from false, disentangle the superficial from the deep, the relevant and the irrelevant. In a word: as it is becoming clear the need to enable new generations to suspect unfounded opinion and distrust hasty ideology.

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