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Credibility, fear, and communication

Credibilidad, miedo y comunicación

ABSTRACT:

Since September 11, 2001, fear in contemporary society has significantly increased. The main responsibilities of this fearful society are modern individualization, on the one hand, and information that exacerbates the perception of risk, on the other. We have replaced communities and close associations with the individual duty of interest, concern, and attachment to oneself; consequently, society has been built over contingency spaces.

Through the information received from social media, the suspicion in the existence of a malevolent motivation in certain specific subjects, or groups, is formed in the head of the common citizen, and therefore fear is inoculated in their daily actions.

Fear is paralyzing, conspiring, manipulating, and fragmenting within society. Society is constantly subjected to media fear that spreads through social networks with unusual speed. And this causes, in the different groups, a limitation of social ties, even a collective silencing, since, seeing the other as a potential aggressor, they abstain from giving their opinion and let the media speak for the rest.

In short, when the visibility of risks is increased or, on the contrary, hidden, fear is exacerbated or silenced. But both power strategies generate a loss of control that can lead to misplaced, thoughtless, and fear-driven actions.

KEY WORDS:

Fear; communication; risk; misinformation; credibility.

RESUMEN:

La sociedad contemporánea, desde el 11 de septiembre de 2001, ha incrementado sus miedos de manera relevante. Quizás, las principales responsabilidades que generaron esta sociedad temerosa sean la individualización moderna, por un lado y la información que exagera la percepción del riesgo. Hemos sustituido las comunidades y las asociaciones de lazos estrechos por el deber individual del interés, la preocupación y el apego por uno mismo, así la sociedad se construyó sobre el terreno sinuoso de la contingencia. En la mente del ciudadano común se conforma, a través de la información que recibe de los medios sociales, la sospecha de la existencia de una motivación malévola en ciertos sujetos concretos, o en ciertos grupos y así el miedo se inculca en su acción cotidiana.

El miedo paraliza, es conspiratorio, manipula y fragmenta a la sociedad. La sociedad se ve constantemente sometida al miedo mediático que se propaga a través de las redes sociales con inusitada velocidad. Y esto provoca, en los diversos grupos una limitación de los lazos sociales, incluso un enmudecimiento colectivo ya que al ver al otro como potencial agresor se abstiene de opinar y deja que los medios hablen por el resto.



En definitiva, cuando la visibilidad de los riesgos se acrecienta o, por el contrario, se oculta, se exagera el miedo o se lo silencia pero ambas estrategias de poder generan una pérdida de control que puede desembocar en acciones fuera de lugar, irreflexivas y dominadas por el miedo.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Miedo; comunicación; riesgo; desinformación; credibilidad.

1. Introduction. The new fears of contemporary society

Human beings have an instinctive reaction, an innate fear, which is a constitutive part of our biological being and which since the beginning of humanity has served to protect us. This is not the fear that we will deal with here, but we will refer to:

The fear that, we learn, the one that allows society to keep me at bay, to place me in a place, a role, the fear that separates me from others, the one that does not let me assume my own sexuality or gender choice, the fear of being in the place of the different, what Eric Fromm calls «the fear of freedom»; a fear learned and conditioned by each culture (Barei, 2020, p. 46).

We begin this reflection on fear in contemporary society with the paradox posed by Bauman (2007): the people who live in the richest and most modernized part of the world are the ones who feel most threatened, insecure and frightened, more inclined to panic and more passionate about everything related to security and protection. Objectively, we are dealing with the people who could be considered the safest in the history of humanity, for whom the dangers that threaten their lives are fewer and more isolated than those that threatened human life in the past and those that currently threaten it in the least developed on the planet.

Bauman points out that these people have «exceptionally ingenious and effective means of anticipating, preventing, and combating some of the dangers that could nonetheless kill us at a younger age or make us sick.» It is that there is evidence of an apparently unstoppable rise in the degree of protection possessed by those who inhabit that portion of the planet that we call the developed world, protection on the three fronts on which life is defended: «against the superior forces of nature, against the innate weak points of our bodies and against the dangers that emanate from the aggression of other people» (Bauman, 2007, p. 167).

Now, fear, Barei maintains, is also necessary to society. Both for survival and for the silencing of people, «fear is a cultural instrument» (Barei, 2020, p. 54).

Although fears have always coexisted with humanity, their magnitude and nature are very different today. Farré Coma maintains that:

The circle of fear, thanks to the work of the media and popular culture, has become the frame from which we evoke the processes of victimization of others in secularized societies where the fear of God no longer leads us to salvation (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 113).

Fear, therefore, is an emotion, and both Boria and Barei (2020) and Farré Coma (2005) agree that it is a dimension that links apparently separate areas of social life. It is a general



orientation of where the danger is imminent and the only response is to avoid the source of the fear or attack the object that causes it.

1.1. FEAR AND INSECURITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

There is, therefore, a semantic articulation mentioned by Boria and Barei and that is that fears in society are in a constant game with violence:

If emotions are anchored in social experiences and practices, fear in particular is exacerbated and materializes in a liminal figure from the point of view of a human experience: horror. Horror, as an intensification of fear, seems to circulate in different geopolitical spaces (Boria and Barei, 2020, p. 11).

While it is safe to say that the modern promise to defeat all threats to human security has been fulfilled to some degree (although not to the extent of ending them once and for all), Bauman (2007) points out that, despite this, the social illusion of liberation from those fears arising from insecurity and nourished by it has not materialized.

In an attempt to explain the enigma of the pressing feeling of insecurity in contemporary society, Castel (2004) suggests that this comes not so much from a lack of protection but from the unavoidable «lack of clarity of its projection» in a social universe that, like ours, “has been organized around a perpetual and desperate search for protection and security.” In other words, we can talk about an obsession with security that has been setting protection standards that are constantly increasing, reaching previously inconceivable high levels and always ahead of the real possibilities of each moment.

This obsession with security and the consequent intolerance that causes any crack or defect in its supply becomes, Bauman (2007, p. 168) points out, «into the most prolific, self-sufficient and probably inexhaustible source of anxiety and fear that they invade us». We agree with Bauman that the modern era has brought spectacular advances in two of the three issues that gave rise to the fears and insecurities that plagued humanity in pre-modern times (specifically, those referring to the powers of nature and the fragility of the body). But regarding the third area –that of human controversies–, it is evident that the promised security never fully materialized, but it did not come close to being so either and, even, Bauman (2007) maintains that perhaps today it has moved away. a little more than optimal levels.

The approach of the philosopher Blázquez-Ruiz who maintains that:

Because we survive day by day and we continue to call that living. We have become foreign and strange characters to ourselves. And as a consequence we feel disconnected, out of place, housed in inhospitable dwellings. We do not know or even glimpse our present or future position in the world, and disorientation or lack of horizon permeates our lives (Blázquez-Ruiz, 1995, p. 21).

Likewise, he warns us that contemporary men and women add to this anguish of being out of place the awareness that the time of their existence does not stop, «but rather flows, but passes by, surpasses us, escapes us and We do not know how to stop this process that makes us attend and feel alien, as mere passive and defenseless spectators» (Blázquez-Ruiz, 1995, p. 22).



As the poet Pizarnik (2010) revealed: «time is afraid / fear is time». Or, in the words of Blázquez-Ruiz (1995), this impotence is often accompanied not only by the experience of inability to transcend the immediate, but also by the feeling of insecurity and fear. Blázquez Ruiz (1995, p. 23) maintains that frequently the person lacks even «sufficient courage to accept, assume and face fear». Since that attitude also requires resolution and commitment. We could affirm that we must first accept the risk in order to be able to face its onslaught afterwards.

On the other hand, the sensations and emotions linked to fear are not alien to power strategies. In this regard, already at the end of the 90s, Mario Benedetti affirmed that neither fear nor insecurity have ever been fully democratic, because they arise as a consequence of the permanent violation of the right to equality. «Political authoritarianism», he affirms, «has given way, even in the First World, to an economic, commercial, educational, and social authoritarianism that is more subtle but equally unfair.» For this reason, he maintains that the variety and intensity of fears are broader and more diverse every day (Benedetti, 1993, p. 11).

So, as Benedetti (1993) warned, fear has expanded its register. In the past, fear was the reflection of bestial actions embodied in the figures of Torquemada, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, dictatorships, McCarthyism and the various witch hunts, torture, deportations, etc., actions that caused fear and even terror. According to Benedetti, these actions re-presented a frontal and ruthless and not very subtle attack on human dignity. Of course, many of those cruelties still persist. Now, Benedetti continues:

Such forms of fear were direct, conscious, obvious. Today other indirect, subtle, semi-hidden forms of fear have been incorporated into community life (not only in the Third World). The facts or attitudes that ignite these new panics are not usually deserving of sanctions; rather they enjoy broad impunity (Benedetti, 1993, p. 11).

To the already mentioned obsession with security, Benedetti (1993, p. 11) adds an enumeration and description of facts or attitudes that generate the new global fears and that are fully in force since in the last thirty years instead of disappearing have consolidated. In the first place, «the misery (...) and (...) the indoctrination of basic violence that television provides daily», stimulated the formation of youth gangs, which have transformed the streets and the night into «free risks» in cities. Secondly, the fear of the worker has mutated from repression or jail, to the loss of his job and, therefore, of his livelihood and security. «The more technical development, computer systems and industry robotization advance, the more terrifying mass unemployment or unemployment becomes» (Benedetti, 1993, p. 11). Thirdly, another disturbing aspect is that even in democracy, «lack of solidarity spreads like a scourge», together with the retreat of the welfare state and the consequent privatization of the economy, public services, health and education and, we would add, the Internet itself. Especially relevant is the privatization of education since:

As public education is usually free or at a modest cost, and private education, on the other hand, is very onerous, the virtual attack against the former could gradually condemn the majority of the population to remain virtually on the margins of educational channels. (...) In this way, the unevenness of the social classes would start early and the privileged groups would feel more secure and safe. As is logical, in the most underprivileged sectors, this attitude generates another fear: the fear of ignorance (Benedetti, 1993, p. 11).

In short, following Benedetti (1993), we can affirm that contemporary society fears urban violence, job loss, lack of solidarity, police interference in private life (since September 11, 2001 we have seen how governments have enacted laws, which begin as measures against terrorism and end up terrorizing quiet citizens), ethnic cleansing and cutting social services for the lower-income population.

2. The circle of fear

Castel (2004) emphasizes that the main responsibility for the situation of this fearful society is modern individualization. Thus, it suggests that, by substituting the closely-knit communities and associations that long ago defined the rules of protection, their related individual rights and obligations, and enforced their fulfillment, by the individual duty of interest, concern, and attachment to oneself. In itself, modern society was built on the winding terrain of contingency.

In a society with these characteristics, where relationships are ephemeral and are built on the basis of selfishness and mistrust in others, Bauman observes:

The perception that human company is a source of existential insecurity and a territory riddled with traps and ambushes tends to become endemic. And, in a kind of vicious circle, it in turn aggravates the chronic weakness of human ties and increases the fears that such precariousness tends to create (Bauman, 2007, p. 171).

Coinciding with this, Boria and Barei (2020) talk about epochal fears, which twist and twitch people. They maintain that today the epochal fear par excellence is the fear of the «other», a fear that takes shape in the various xenophobias and ethnic cleansing that have taken root in this globalized world.

«Today we seem to go from one “security alert” to another», Bauman (2007, p. 170) warns us, «without a break in continuity and without the next one being less alarming than the previous one.» And his observation is interesting since these successive outbreaks of panic are usually preceded by news that a certain organization (a hospital, a prison, a food factory or a supermarket, a water treatment plant, etc.) «is not as infallible and does not work as perfectly» as society had assumed, therefore the resulting fear tends to be explained as «the product of evil intentions and acts» (Bauman, 2007, p. 170).

This kind of dramatic news, which installs a feeling of fear, always points to a culprit. This subject is presented as an abject, cruel, selfish, insensitive person, most of the time ugly, and in all cases very different from the common citizen who receives the information. And it is these evil subjects who are transformed into scapegoats, both by the opinion of the expert panelists on TV and radio opinion programs, and by the word of the new influencers that populate the digital social media, and thus are installed as guilty of the fears in the popular conversation that circulates through social networks. They are accused of being largely responsible for all the fears in society, whether these are the product of nature or abnormalities in bodily health. And these influencers, Han argues, are «revered as role models. This gives his image a religious dimension» (Han, 2022, p. 19). Therefore they are believed with the strength of faith.



So, this information mechanism, Bauman affirms, is responsible for the fact that contemporary insecurity is “marked by a fear that has as its main object human maleficence and human criminals.” (Bauman, 2007, p. 170)

Through the information received from the traditional and social media, the suspicion of the existence of a malevolent motivation in certain specific subjects or in certain groups is formed in the mind of the common citizen, and thus fear is inoculated in their thinking and daily actions, warns Bauman (2007). But also through the distrust in the perseverance, dedication and reliability of their colleagues, a negative charge arises that is linked, almost inevitably, with the little willingness to make their relationships with others «something solid, lasting» and therefore trustworthy.» Así, Bauman advierte que el miedo «gana impulso y aceleración propios; adquiere un ímpetu y una lógica de desarrollo autónomos y precisa de muy poca atención y de casi ninguna aportación adicional para difundirse y crecer de forma imparable» (Bauman, 2007, p. 171).

Indeed, fears impel people to take defensive measures, to put up fences and walls, and these defensive measures, Bauman argues, «give an aura of immediacy, tangibility and credibility to the real or putative threats from which the fears presumably emanate» (Bauman, 2007, p. 171). It is this response to anxiety that turns gloomy perceptions and premonitions into an everyday reality for the individual, making tangible what would otherwise be nothing more than a ghost. Fear takes root in people’s motivations, settles in their environment and in their actions, and fills their daily routines.

As Blázquez-Ruiz states:

Fear and insecurity that gradually begin to contact and approach from a certain distance, for circumstantial reasons at first, but that end up sticking from the outside like sticky limpets on our body, later untimely assaulting our inner world, occupying more and more space and ending up being destroyed. become entrenched as a consequence of lived experiences or unpredictable expectations (Blázquez-Ruiz, 1995, p. 23).

What happens is that there is a displacement or decoupling, according to Bauman, between the actions inspired by fear and the existential tremors that it generates. The problem is that beyond the enormous effort that subjects make towards those areas of protection or personal security towards which fear has moved, it is unlikely that they will thus be able to neutralize or block the authentic sources of fear. For this reason, Bauman (2007) proposes the existence of a vicious circle of fear and the actions inspired by it.

3. Fear and communication

Salazar maintains that the advent of the media society, the hegemony of TV and the power of the image, digitization, the network society and the virtual world, de-ideologized society and imposed new codes on it. He affirms that this new communication paradigm imposed a «prefabricated map of contemporary society where uncertainty, the volatility of everything material, placed us on the platform of permanent risk» (Salazar, 2009, p. 108).

From this position, Salazar (2009) argues that people no longer occupy a safe place. Absolutely everything that surrounds them is «sustained by an environment of insecurity.»

Without protection, people are totally vulnerable in all spheres of their individual and social behaviour.

For Salazar (2009), then, insecurity and contingency are two prevailing factors in the daily life of the individual, factors that generate fear. These range from risky viruses for the information stored on your personal computer, to the contingency of blackmail through cell phones or cyberbullying on social networks; even the fear of ending up unemployed due to the untimely bankruptcy of the company where he provides his services.

To these factors, Salazar adds «the fears instilled by the news of natural disasters» and some of those that Benedetti had already warned about in the 1990s, public insecurity, economic and financial instability, the suspension of constitutional guarantees by threat of terrorism, etc. This causes in the person an «invisible anguish or endemic state similar to [a] latent dilated schizophrenia, capable of turning us into fully vulnerable subjects, with no sense of time, because tomorrow does not exist and is subject to uncontrollable factors derived from uncertainty» (Salazar, 2009, p. 108).

In line with Salazar, Han (2022) argues that the digitization of the world undergoes a radical change in the perception of citizens, their relationship with the world and their coexistence. Obviously, the citizen today feels overwhelmed, stunned by the informational and communicative tidal wave that surrounds him. In such an environment, says Salazar, the media are compelled to broadcast the news, the banality of their speeches, the spectacularity of their newscasts, with simple forms, accessible to the majority. That «simplicity of the words that most of the time reduces the vocabulary to no more than 400 common words» (Salazar, 2009, p. 111).

In this way, Salazar describes the information that circulates in digital social media:

It draws an irrelevant reality where it deserves to be changed or there is conflict that threatens the interests of big businessmen, but in trivial situations it magnifies the fact or situation described, copiously evokes violence and when the stories multiply a hundredfold, dramatizes events and dramatizes in the collective subconscious, drawing a map of terror and fear in the auditorium (Salazar, 2009, p. 111).

In order to reach this new audience overloaded with information, the digital media are pushed to destroy the rational discourse determined by the book culture and produce a mediocracy, as Han (2022) calls it. In this way, the contents are intermingled in fun, playful formats, the dramatization of politics in which the performance of the actor is more important than the content, and affective communication. In affective communication, Han expresses, «it is not the best arguments that prevail, but the information with the greatest potential for excitement» (Han, 2022, p. 140).

To adapt to these digital audiences, the media also adopted melodrama as a format, life stories close to the citizen. Monsiváis points out that in the melodrama “we observe the acceptance of structural poverty, a singular vision of democracy, the daily intake of violence and even the ideas of the national” all structured with “the gestures and outbursts typical of the soap opera” (cited in Salazar, 2009, p. 111).

By establishing that melodrama explains the sensations of insignificance, people turn their fears into the language destined to the contingencies of illness and unhappy love, typical of this genre, and that explains, according to Monsiváis (quoted in Salazar, 2009),





the dimension theatrical strategy against violence. It is that panic also calms down. And the melodrama promotes the metamorphosis of what has been lived with fear and anguish in the theatrical performance. In short, the melodramatic information connoted in digital social media combines, according to Salazar (2009), three elements: dreams, farce and fiction, elements that are generators of the social climate, whose specificity is registered in alarm and terror. In a society in which excessive alarmism materializes, the new threats were irresponsibly popularized by the media, denounces Salazar and accuses the media of sowing anguish by:

Misinterpreting «the consequences of climate change, the new epidemics and the rebirth of others with the alteration of the climate, the scarcity of some foods but they did not link it with our forms of food and biotechnology, but they made fun of the deficit in order to alter the collective subconscious and denote a fear warned as an indelible risk» (Salazar, 2009, p. 112).

4. The communication of fear

4.1. VENTURE COMPANIES

The situation of contemporary society, described above, can be condensed in the expression that Beck generalized: risk society:

A phase of development of modern society in which, through the dynamics of change, the production of political, ecological and individual risks escapes, increasingly, from the control and protection institutions of the so-called industrial society (Beck, 1996, p. 201).

That is, it is a society with a high risk for the normal development of organizations in general. We warned with Bartoli (King Lennon and Bartoli, 2020) that organizations are then subjected to the pressure of a large number of factors that obviously transform their near and remote environment into a high-risk environment.

In current risk societies, we observe continuous social and political changes and growing uncertainty (evident in issues such as health, communication, the economy, political leadership, etc.). Likewise, a remorseless advance of scientific and technological innovations is materialized in the face of time-cost pressures that do not allow an adequate scientific evaluation of risks vs. the benefits of a new innovation (added to an evident separation between ethics and scientific knowledge).

As we have already said, in risk societies there is evidence of a growing tendency towards individualization, on the one hand, and a public opinion that is asserting itself more and more, through the numerous social organizations that have emerged in recently or simply making your voice heard on digital social networks.

For his part, Fernando Zerboni (quoted in Campanario, 2020, p. 8) explains that the key today is to understand that the level of complexity of the problem we are experiencing is so great that there is no person or expert in the world capable of understanding it or Generate a model to explain it. «We are in a quadrant that is not even of extreme complexity, but of disorder or chaos», he maintains, «and we have to move towards that of complexity».



In the current context, affirms Zerboni (quoted in Campanario, 2020), it is increasingly difficult to plan, there is no time for tests or trials, and, likewise, no one has sufficient knowledge of all the variables, and yet action must be taken the same, because it is not an option to let the crisis escalate.

Farré Coma affirms that the current culture of mediatized risk:

Leads to the formation of cultures of fear that constitute the culmination of a new social reality that requires deepening and interest in this emerging field of research, both from the configuration of collective identities and personal (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 96).

A more than interesting perspective to understand the relationship between fear and communication. Allowing oneself to be trapped by the networks of the cultures of fear supposes, in the vision of Farré Coma (2005), an individual and collective surrender in the face of the growing uncertainties that the culture of risk generates and in the face of the extreme contradictions of globalization. It is that fear undermines.

The trust of the citizenry that becomes a victim, the credibility of the democratic institutions that question their legitimacy and, ultimately, the whole of the democratic systems, incapable of rearticulating trapped in the iron cage of the (in) security (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 97).

4.2. THE NOTION OF REAL RISK AND PERCEIVED RISK

The notion of risk is useful, then, to explain how communication can affect fears in contemporary society. But, before continuing to analyze the problem, what do we understand by risk?

The definition that we developed with Javier Bartoli can help us (Rey Lennon and Bartoli Piñero, 2020). Essentially, risk is a measure of the adverse effect of an issue on society. Its formula is probability of occurrence x impact. It is about assessing and communicating the potential hazards associated with a particular process in relation to the safeguards and benefits it offers. Risk is basically information that helps citizens to make choices concerning, for example, their health, safety and, above all, the ecosystem in which they live.

Now, risk and fear are different concepts. Ferraro explains it precisely:

Fear is fundamentally a psychologically different experience from perceived risk. While risk involves a cognitive judgment, fear is much more emotional in character. Fear activates a series of complex bodily transformations that alert the actor to the possibility of danger (Ferraro, cited in Altheide, 2002, p. 188).

Risk assessment becomes essential for public opinion when:

- a) A new risk arises, for example, the mad cow crisis in Europe in the late 1990s; the new terrorism from 9/11; or the recent Coronavirus pandemic.
- b) The degree of an existing risk changes. Namely, the risk of possession of firearms after a case of a massacre at a school is reported in the media; or the risk of flying by plane after an accident that has just been seen on TV.



- c) A new perception of a risk occurs. The potential impact that certain plastics (phthalates) may have on the human body; or the case of “transgenic” foods (Rey Lennon and Bartoli, 2020).

Clearly there is no such thing as zero risk. The effort to eliminate a risk is never enough when facing a problem or crisis. If we analyze it from the point of view of environmental engineering or security, the risk is a tangible problem. However, risk from the point of view of public opinion is a problem of perception. If public opinion perceives that a risk exists, it exists even if there is no concrete factual problem.

It is also important to note that each person, when perceiving risk, seeks confirmation of their own prejudices. If you perceive that transgenic cereals cause cancer, somehow despite not finding scientific evidence to support your perception, you will look for those media, those influencers that confirm your own prejudice beyond any investigation or rational argument that you support the opposite (King Lennon and Bartoli, 2020).

Also, the public is not looking for zero risk. Each person carries out «cost-benefit» type evaluations on a daily basis. For example, when buying in a supermarket, the consumer knows that it is riskier to buy a third-level brand «X» than a first-level one, without However, he takes the risk because he considers it beneficial to save a few pennies.

Regarding perceived risk and real risk, it is necessary to stop and consider Farré Coma's position, who maintains that risk itself does not exist as an ontological reality, but is rather an epistemological reality. For this reason, the risk «exists only when we recognize it as such» (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 104).

From this perspective, we cannot distinguish risk from risk perception, and this is because «what we do not perceive does not exist because we are unaware of it.» In light of this argument, Farré Coma points out, we should not burden the inks on the concept of perception since we would fall into a psychological reduction, «forgetting that the definition of risk takes place in the social context where the bases for its definition are agreed upon.» domestication» (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 104).

It is clear that if the risk exists only when we recognize it as such, the risk will have a different meaning for different people. For example, there are people who are terrified of traveling by plane. However, that same person is not afraid of riding in a car (statistically more accidents occur on the roads than in the skies). In other words, they are evaluating two risks differently and that difference is the result of their prior knowledge, their experience, ultimately their life history, but not necessarily empirical knowledge based on evidence.

4.3. RISK AND RISK COMMUNICATION

At this point, it is necessary to address the question of the role of the media «as social amplifiers of risk that affects, in terms of magnification or attenuation, the social perception of risk that the population, public opinion, the audience may have, the areas of reception» (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 105).

We perceive our environment from the structural mediation processes of the media. As Walter Lippmann (1922) pointed out 100 years ago, between the images in our mind

and the outside world are the media. Many of the mediatized risks are presented to us as invisible, diffuse, points out Farré Coma (2005), although they can be very visible in their consequences in daily decision-making and others such as the risk of contracting cancer from smoking –voluntary risk and integrated into our day-to-day decision– from so visible it becomes invisible.

Likewise, Farré Coma (2005) affirms that the risks will be real if they are defined as such, but even though they are merely perceptions, they have consequences in terms of insecurity, uncertainty and fear. As is evident, the political implications of this question are enormous.

Farré Coma (2005) himself warns that the media are important sources in the social amplification of risk perceptions, partly due to the very logic of the criteria in the selection and treatment of news related to risk issues. And this largely responds to the professional logic by which the media prioritize novel facts, disruptive consequences, the large number of people affected, drama, conflict and controversy, simplification to emphasize the interpretive framework of everyday life, and the emotional images that allow the theme to crystallize, and based on these criteria of newsworthiness, the media, either due to their negativity, distortion, sensationalism, dramatization or exaggeration of the themes that, at first, decontextualize and, in a second moment, recontextualize in their informative forms.

But, to this effect of amplification of the risk perceptions of the media that Farré Coma points out, we must add two factors that have grown in weight during the second decade of the 21st century. Firstly, the substantial increase in social organizations, both in the field of environmental groups as well as in the consumer sector. Its role is today more active and strategic since its primary objective is to access the agendas of the media and public opinion to influence the political agenda. And secondly, the explosion of social media and Change.org-style petition platforms that provide quick and direct access to the public without the mediation of conventional media organizations.

Gil Calvo explains the relationship between risk and risk communication when he points out the peculiar interaction between real risk and perceived risk, when the latter grows due to the information provided by the media –which, although not alarmist, multiply its contents, including those that they sow social alarm–, «the latent real risk can also grow, if expectations are raised that are capable of favoring the multiplication of risks and inhibiting the collective ability to overcome them» (Gil Calvo, 2003, p. 39).

This communication generates the effect of making people believe that if the social perception of the risk revealed by the media is growing, it is because the social production –the collective construction– of real risk is growing. «This is how the media», warns Gil Calvo, “inadvertently become firefighters arsonists, since the publicity of the perceived risk helps to magnify it” (Gil Calvo, 2003, p. 39). Thus we can formulate two propositions:

- I. The more information circulating about a risk, the greater the perceived risk.
- II. The greater the social perception of a risk, the greater the belief that the social production of real risk grows.

However, Salazar (2009) maintains that the real risk that we live on a daily basis does not properly describe or enunciate the true catastrophic dimension of issues such as the financial crisis, the cost of state expenditures to solve the liquidity crisis of the banks, the losses of

pension funds, the depletion of oil reserves worldwide, corruption, tax exemptions for large companies, environmental deterioration, in short, the true global problems that we must solve as a whole society.

In his critical approach, Salazar (2009) argues that the risk perceived by society is constructed by the dominant sector through the media and attends to those aspects present in daily life but that are not harmful to the interests of large corporations, companies, governments or prominent public figures. Salazar points out that:

The intention is to modify the meaning of the news (...) because by arousing one or other expectations, they condition the attitudes of the actors on whom the risk factors depend, alter both their assessment of the perceived danger and their ability to overcome them (Salazar, 2009, p. 112).

We also know that a contingent condition that modifies risk communication is the source of risk information. Recent research (Edelman, 2022) indicates that governments have lost much of their credibility to the detriment of social organizations and even companies. When ordinary citizens have to carry out a risk assessment, they take into account the source of the information and if it comes from a social organization. Even if they do not have the knowledge or the adequate technical equipment to carry out this type of evaluation, they will consider it much more credible than that of the public body in question.

Because, as we pointed out, perception gives entity to real risk. For example, in the case of the Brent Spar oil platform, owned by the Shell company in the North Sea, Greenpeace became the most reliable source of information in the conflict, despite the fact that it falsified some of the information. Conclusion: Shell had to dismantle the platform on land instead of sinking it in the North Sea as was their first option approved even by the relevant authority (King Lennon and Bartoli, 2020).

On the other hand, we must take into account another contingent condition that limits the effect of risk communication; we are not referring to the fact that basic attitudes are difficult to change. It is very difficult for a person who already has a clear attitude and considers that something is not risky in itself to change that attitude. These types of attitudes are solidified from a long process of information and persuasion. Many times these attitudes crystallized by the pressure of the belonging group or by the example provided by an influencer who said person follows in a certain social network and in whom they fully trust.

However, authors such as the aforementioned Salazar and Altheide have a much more critical view of the role of the media in terms of distorting the perception of risk and the consequent generation of fear in society. It is true that their approaches predate the rise of social networks and, perhaps for this reason, they think of more passive audiences.

Altheide, for example, maintains from an interpretive approach that media logic through its formats contributes significantly to the construction of fear in the context of communities mediated in their identity and definition of the situation:

Fear plays an essential part in social control. There are various reasons for this. First, we examine the process that makes social control work. The things we fear are related to how we communicate and learn in everyday life (...) Social life (...) has drifted towards a «risk society», organized around communication oriented towards police surveillance, control and risk prevention (Altheide, 2002, p. 14).

Regarding Altheide's position, Farré Coma (2005) clarifies:

Far from an excessive accusation against the media, Altheide points out that we can doubt that the media play a central role in fears and risk perceptions because in fact, it is important to remember that the media amplify or attenuate, but do not cause the sense of risk in society.

It is true that since the advent of social networks, the public is in some sense more creative and participatory, and this complicates the role and influence of the media in the social amplification of risk perception. In any case, Farré Coma points out, the accusation against the media is often used as «an escape valve in the real aggravation of tensions between experts, risk managers and lay audiences.» And, likewise, this debate is due to not understanding in a coherent and full way the impact of the current, complex and plural information system in its relations with the audiences (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 112).

Obviously, the causal connection between the media and public perceptions of fear is difficult to establish in isolation, much more so today, since the traditional agenda-setting power possessed by the press, radio, and TV is today, if not attenuated, at least living side by side with social media and user-generated media like YouTube. Perhaps today it would be better to think of a circular relationship, as Farré Coma (2005, p. 112) points out, in which:

The greater the fear of potential danger experienced in the social environment, the more people decide to stay at home longer where, in turn, they are more regularly exposed to the media that tell them stories that reinforce their anxieties.

Something that could be observed during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

In short, we agree with Farré Coma when he states that the media are always there:

To alert us to some kind of danger, even though this media concern alerting to risks is the symptom of the problem and not its cause. It would be totally improbable that a relaxed and placid public, with high doses of common sense, would be influenced towards a permanent state of panic through the manipulation of the media (Farré Coma, 2005, p. 113).

5. The effects of collective fear

The problem generated by fear positioned in the collective as an environment and future scenario warns Salazar, is that:

It immobilizes collective action, deprives the individual of his need to associate, to seek validation of the information received from others, because the perceived risk builds terror in such a way that it isolates men because they make the fear-provoking factor invisible (p. 113).

What is perceived is that fear is paralyzing, conspiratorial, manipulative and fragmenting within society. As we have pointed out, contemporary society is constantly subjected to media fear that spreads through social networks with unusual speed. And this causes, in the various social groups, a «restrictive action of social ties, collective muting or social

autism», since seeing the other as a potential aggressor –as Bauman (2007) pointed out and Salazar reinforces– «does not qualify him as a depositary of trust through the intersubjective relationship, but refrains from giving an opinion and lets the media speak and disseminate the opinion that is silenced by the rest» (Salazar, 2009, p. 113).

In short, when the visibility of perceived risks increases, fear is exacerbated and a loss of control is generated which, as Farré Coma (2005) points out, can lead to actions that are out of place, thoughtless and dominated by said fear. Likewise, in the opposite sense, when the real risks are hidden or their social invisibility is proceeded by removing them from the agendas, both the media and the political institutions become responsible for omission.

By way of conclusion, we agree with Farré Coma (2005) that perhaps the solution to this dilemma of fear and communication involves providing citizens with tools and information so that they become protagonists in the sociocultural appropriation of these risk dynamics, giving them a liberating sense from common sense and the legitimate exercise of social responsibility and citizen action.

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