



BEYOND FAKE NEWS:

A strategy for de-polarizing and promoting dialogue in the networks

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Beyond Fake News: A strategy for de-polarizing and promoting dialogue in the networks

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The Challenge

We live in times when a new dynamic to the circulation of political messages on the internet has created a space which no longer differentiates the public from the private, thereby allowing for unprecedented forms of political communication which increasingly influence people on the margin of the traditional means of communication – from Facebook’s “public square” to the “personal messages” of WhatsApp groups. In these new spaces, old entry barriers are removed allowing for the emergence of new communications techniques and professionals.

It is now possible to use a whole new range of tools which reinvent the techniques used for political propaganda. Access to data banks allow for the construction of psychosocial profiles which identify the affinities, prejudices and fears of internauts; robots send the messages and are increasingly able to interact with humans; sophisticated programs can even falsify images and voices.

The new communication technologies create the possibility for using complementary techniques: on the one hand, they allow the authors of the messages to remain anonymous or to hide behind apocryphal profiles on the social networks which protect them from assuming responsibility for the consequences of their actions; on the other, they open up new spaces for camouflaging and

filtering political propaganda through the infiltration of news which is extraneous to the interests of a group on Whatsapp, (a group of friends or family, a group to share a hobby or a range of different shared interests from professional activities to football), or through the use of apparently neutral sites and audiences of “influencers”.

The diffusion is carried out through the production of news by a hard core of militants and subsequently made viral by people who spread this news to their networks of friends and contacts, an especially powerful way of attracting attention which is difficult to achieve impersonally through social networks.

The combination of these new techniques with the political and social developments of the last decade in Brazil has had a very destructive impact on the public space. Sensationalism, taking information out of its context, exaggeration, lying, offensive language, statements of prejudice, and the dissemination of sentiments to provoke fear, or a sense of chaos, disorder and immorality in relation to public life, have come to occupy a central place in political propaganda; sentiments which are molded by the techniques of psychological warfare, developed in a decentralized form and surgically aimed to reach specific types of audiences.¹

1 As an illustration, research on the use of Twitter, published in the Review Science, concluded that false information spreads six times more than true information. Source: <https://sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1094>

A series of cognitive biases account for the way people absorb this information, the most common of which is that of confirmation, the tendency to believe that which we already believe. This is frequently used by propagandists to pass on false information, reviving prejudices by resorting to pre-established short-cuts.

In the case of open platforms, the process of infiltration can occur through different forms. Blogs or Facebook pages created by propagandists which are initially dedicated to neutral themes, (it could be soccer or any type of interest), can then be activated in periods of political agitation to create support for a particular candidate or political tendency.

To deal with this new reality, traditional journalism tries to reinvent itself, dedicating more space to checking information and creating dedicated platforms. This is a necessary and worthy response, but it confronts a series of obstacles. In the first place, the sheer quantity of political messages is enormous, and the process of checking is time and money consuming. Secondly, a great many people who receive false information, identify with its sentiments and disseminate it without any further checks. And thirdly, even when the content received is little credible or evidently exaggerated it nevertheless has an impact on the recipient's unconscious.

The efficacy of "fake news" is that they are purely pieces of propaganda with no real informative content. They are

memes, caricatures, distortions or information refashioned and taken out of context whose objective is to launch a systematic and demonizing attack on opponents. These bits of propaganda are sometimes disguised as news and aim to create a spirit of emotional and cognitive resistance to any information which does not confirm specific beliefs, creating a destructive polarization of the public space.

For a way of communicating which does not fall into this trap

Democratic life presupposes conflict, the confrontation of ideas and alternative proposals for society. Political polarization in this sense is part of democracy. In fact, democracy is the only regime where criticism, disagreements, and the denunciation of corruption or any other misdemeanor are possible. Democracy becomes undone when an eventual opponent is considered an enemy to be undermined and destroyed. The transformation of democratic politics into a propaganda war whose objective is to demonize the opponent, is made possible through the destruction of the principles of debate based on informed arguments which underly the peaceful coexistence of different visions.

From the perspective from which we are treating this issue, the systematic production and dissemination of “fake news” should be understood as a political project for the destruction of the democratic arena, rather than simply an accumulation of separate messages. Those who produce them are not concerned with the specific content of each message but with producing a constant bombardment which impacts on the recipients consciously and unconsciously, transforming sentiments and values and diminishing the capacity for critical reflection. In this

sense the objective of fake news is to create a state of spirit in line with a vision of the world aimed at destroying the democratic public arena and characterized by cognitive and emotional closure in the face of discordant content.

On the understanding that new strategies of political propaganda on the internet contribute to the disinformation and the contamination of the spaces of public debate and democratic co-existence, we must look for new ways to confront their deleterious effects.

The majority of consumers and propagators of fake news are not fanatics, but little by little they become contaminated by a climate of destructive polarization. As with all of us, they live with contradictory values. Rather than entering into the game of denying the other, we should propose responses to fake news which promote reflection and the values of co-existence that question polarizations.

Instead of confronting fake news by entering into its game, constantly demanding retractions, which means that the political propaganda is always on the offensive dictating the rhythm and agenda of the public debate, we propose the strategy of not accepting provocations which only lead us into a zone of destructive polarization. This means that we need to recover our capacity for self-control and an attitude of civic dialogue, always replying to fake news with invitations to reflection which strengthen the values and the autonomy of the recipients numbed by the impact of fake news.

So, our aim is to indicate ways of communicating which instead of confronting the disinformation and contamination of the democratic debate head-on, evade the traps of destructive polarization.²

2 See *Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action*, <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/>

The strategies for destroying the public space

What is the communication strategy to bring society to a destructive polarization? How does one destroy the democratic environment and pluralistic debate?

The aim is always to promote intolerance to those who think differently and to transform ideological identities into closed systems impervious to argument. The main strategies of fake news as a political project are:

1. *The demonization of all those who are not part of the political group*, who are then considered enemies of the people, religion, family or country. They become the object of constant attacks, connecting them to a range of vices, character defects and conspiracies, often based on information taken out of context about their lives. Or they are associated with people of dubious reputation to undermine respect for them and the institutions which they represent.
2. *The promotion of conspiracy theories*. Conspiracy theories create a paranoid and diabolical version of the world. The conspirator is the one “behind it all”, a powerful minority (or individual) who is against the interests of the country, the family, order, the people, the nation or the class to which the opponents are directly or indirectly associated.

The role of conspiracy theories is above all to identify outsiders as responsible for the eventual problems which a country is facing, especially the errors of their leaders. The blame is always placed on others.

3. *The identification of all those who disagree as belonging to the same unified group*, although it is evident that enormous differences exist between them. This homogenization is achieved through categorizing all those who disagree as belonging to a single tribe (communists, fascists, feminists), which is then caricatured. This homogenization of the enemy helps create a feeling of unity and community among those opposed to the enemy. This idea of a common enemy allows the most diverse resentments, prejudices and group frustrations to be channeled in a single direction. Projecting onto the enemy the responsibility for a whole range of social malaises simplifies problems whose complexity needs to be recognized if a society is to respond adequately to the challenges it faces. Everything is reduced to blaming the other and having blind faith in the leader.
4. *The promotion of fear with regard to possible social transformations*, which creates a sensation of chaos and an idealization of the past, (in spite of the fact that even given the existence of challenges, the quality of life today is better than in the past, there is less oppression of different groups and greater consciousness of the rights of each citizen).

5. *The promotion of authoritarian tendencies* with the aim of producing a “new normal” which tests the limits of the judicial and moral system. In this new normal, offences, lies and systematic defamation are allowed. The aim is to destroy norms of civility and respect, making constant aggression an acceptable form of political action. Fake news and the declarations of authoritarian political leaders are continuously pushing the limits of what is acceptable in public debate. If these limits are felt to be threatened and there is a public reaction, the most common response is a tactical retreat, claiming that the issue was not to be taken seriously, that it was taken out of context or that it was misunderstood.
6. *Shift the focus of attention*. This technique, a rhetorical ruse, is drawn on when the leader makes a serious mistake or is faced with a scandal, and is designed to divert attention by creating alternative sensationalist news or explaining away the event as the result of a conspiracy.

What can be done?

Some guidelines for action

There is no single solution to confronting fake news as a political project. As we have already mentioned, journalistic initiatives for the checking of information are important. It is also important to discuss what can be achieved in the sense of regulation, involving innovative approaches such as the protection of personal data used for political propaganda on the internet. Central too is the effort to educate the population on the way fake news is created, and popular prejudices are promoted.³ Actions should be developed within the educational system to form a generation of citizens with emotional and cognitive instruments to protect them from manipulation on and off the internet.

What can be proposed in the context of daily communication? How to respond when one is the recipient of fake news? In what follows, we develop a number of insights on strategies and practical proposals to re-sensitize public opinion on the terrain where this propaganda operates – values, sentiments and cognitive biases.

³ See for example, Sobrevivendo nas Redes:
http://www.plataformademocratica.org?Arquivos/Sobrevivendo_nas_redes.pdf

Guidelines for an alternative way of communicating

1. *Dispute the meta-narrative behind the news as a whole, rather than focusing on each piece of false information*

Most consumers and propagators of fake news are not fanatics but become gradually contaminated by the atmosphere of destructive polarization. As with all of us they harbor contradictory values. Rather than falling into the game of denying the other we should send messages which promote reflection and the values of civilized exchange.

The first guideline is that in our daily communication we should not confront fake news on a one-to-one basis. Faced with an avalanche of propaganda and memes, the internaut who wants to reply is already placed on the terrain defined by the producers of fake news. Exchanges at this level result in a hardening of positions and can lead to mutual offences. Rather than contesting the content, we propose that in replying to the fake news which people receive on a daily basis the focus should be on questioning the meta-discourse, the values which are being promoted and the cognitive biases which they manipulate. Within a democratic perspective the aim should be to question the type of world that people want to live in, the values that should be defended, and the importance of maintaining one's autonomy and capacity for reflection.

II. *Not everything goes. Defense of what we consider to be good cannot justify the use of fake news*

The second guideline is that combatting the propaganda of destructive polarization demands a democratic and ethical commitment which excludes a policy of “anything goes”. Fake news in fact can be found at all points of the political spectrum. The defense of a democratic public space requires, firstly, a strengthening of the fundamental values which make debate possible, involving a plurality of viewpoints. Without this, no democratic cause can exist. A response to fake news therefore should not have the objective of defending a contrary political opinion, but that of restoring a reflexive autonomy.

In the current Brazilian context, the main tendency towards destructive polarization is concentrated on the extreme right and for this reason we have focused on themes associated with this tendency. The proposals developed here, however, are applicable to every anti-democratic tendency. Processes of polarization are relational and need to be seen as a problem facing everyone. Studies on political behavior in Brazil, for instance, indicate that the vulnerability of specific sectors to right wing propaganda of polarization may have roots in the polarizing and not well understood behavior of progressive groups.⁴

4 Fonte: <https://fundacaotidesetubal.org.br/noticias/3935/pesquisa-o-conservadorismo-e-as-questoes-sociais-apresenta-resultados-para-o-dialogo-entre-diferentes-setores-da-sociedade>

III. *Aim at what unites us*

A third guideline which follows on from the previous one is that we should work to revert the current waves of destructive polarization, confronting all collective identities which are closed to questioning and impermeable to the debating of ideas and information.

IV. *Giving up arrogance, excessive group affirmation, or treating the other as an enemy*

A fourth guideline for action concerns the importance of the tone of the reply given in any kind of communication. The existence of collective identities does not imply the elimination of individual reflexive capabilities. Within the members of the most diverse political labels there are individuals with different positions. Labeling is a way of denying diversity and the possibility of dialogue and should be avoided especially in personal relations. Labeling transforms politics into war where the objective is to dehumanize and, at the limit, to destroy the enemy. To confront this challenge, we should not treat the other as an enemy with definitive positions. On the contrary, we should remind them of the values of conviviality which all share. Our objective is to defend the values which sustain the plural public space.

V. *No-one has a monopoly of truth*

In the confrontation with fake news it is always important to remember the distinction between factual truth and the Truth, (that is a set of beliefs and ways of viewing the world within which individual facts are interpreted). This distinction implies that it is up to each individual to pursue the Truth, which is not reducible to the data that academics and journalists divulge after they have passed through the necessary filters and checks. The only truth that unites us as a democratic society is the respect in public forums for the diversity of opinions based on facts and rational arguments. As we have seen, a good part of the initiative taken to confront fake news implies that what is being attacked and what is basically at stake are factual truths. In fact, however, the main concern is not with individual facts but with the promotion of a Truth which denies the relevance of facts and the right to a plurality of ideas.

We should insist on the rejection of lies, and the role of curiosity and learning which demands that people confront their capacity for reflection and for promoting debate informed by plural viewpoints. The presupposition should be that people have a legitimate right to interpret the facts but should not accept lies nor the destruction of democratic conviviality.

VI. *Where a conversation takes place is important: choose environments where the incentive for group performance is reduced*

Open social networks such as Twitter, Instagram, Youtube or Facebook stimulate group performance through the “retweet” and “liked”, etc tools. The online “public places” are different from group “rooms” and private messages which should be taken into account when confronting destructive polarization. We must continuously be aware of the place where the conversation is taking place, giving preference to environments where incentives to take on roles are reduced. Private groups are used for the dissemination of attacks and false information precisely because these are based on networks of informal trust. At the same time, private groups help to segment the audience since the information circulated is not available to those outside the group. These characteristics should be used to promote civic and democratic communication.

VII. *To demonstrate that information is false it is best to use sources which come from the same universe as the disseminator*

If the need to challenge a piece of information were urgent because of the immediate damage its dissemination could cause, one of the few guidelines which might be effective is the recourse to sources and spokespersons who are compatible with the chosen audience.

VIII. *Always be clear on the objective: the reconstruction of the public democratic space*

Collective identities are a part of social life. All such identities, religious, national, political, or sportive, create loyalties and value the opinions and trajectory of a particular group, desiring that they be successful. Clearly, we do not have the same disposition towards other groups as we have to our own.

In a democratic setting, collective identities do not disappear but the sense of a community of free citizens is created who participate in the public space upholding values of liberty, peaceful co-existence, and respect for plurality. The existence of a public democratic space does not eliminate collective identities but rather these rest on individuals who maintain their reflexive autonomy, and their loyalty to groups, therefore, does not imply an inability to relate to the arguments of others. In this sense, the confrontation with fake news should be based on the construction of a national democratic collective identity which accepts the diversity of its tribes, formed by individuals who share a public space.