

*Facing the threat of fake news: A New Citizen
Responsibility*

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Abstract

The world of public information has been severely affected by the disproportionate increase in fake news, due to the uncontrolled impulse that social networks have given them. The problem is extremely complex because it involves the entire society, regardless of cultural levels, ideologies or socio-economic conditions. Such is the impact of this situation that the traditional journalistic media have found it difficult to unravel the truth in an incessant whirlwind of confusing information without support from the facts.

Presentation

As I have expressed in other articles and in the book *Fake News Conspiracy*, humanly there is no a radical solution to stop the dissemination of lies through whichever means. This communication phenomenon is not new, nor did Goebbels begin it in Nazi Germany. It is something that has been present in human nature since the beginning of civilization and that is sometimes expressed by self-preservation and, generally, by ideological, partisan or group interests.

However, what is new is the boom that this phenomenon has obtained thanks to the development of multiple social networks. Due to this circumstance, anyone potentially becomes a propagator of fake news. In other words, the entire society, in its various strata and cultures,

is involved in current communicational processes and that, without a doubt, is something that complicates any attempt to control information manipulation.

A Erratic Information World

The global technological revolution that has been shaking contemporary world has impuled a frenetic expansion of social media use. In the two last decades, their use has been increased consistently. Today, billions of people are using, at lease, one interpersonal communication network and the amount continues growing.

When journalism reached an important projection in society and clearly demonstrated its possibilities of influencing the processes of public opinion formation, there were many people who raised their voices of concern about the use that the mass media could do of this “power”. For this reason, given the real impossibility of regulating or limiting freedom of expression, some universities started offering courses to promote the professionalization of news reporters, which included legal knowledge and ethical standards. It is timely to remember that the evolution and complexity of journalism marked the beginning of the theory of mass communication and the academic concern for its process and, especially, its effects on society.

Nowadays, social media have reached all sectors in society, and they have provoked a real information revolution. Almost everybody is involved in the new information process generated by them. However, that new communicational phenomenon has starting to perturb the traditional news reporting, generating a confusion situation because of mixing true facts, fake news and gossips. People, in this case, are affected by an over exposition to a pretty contaminated news environment.

Some researching institutions are, right now, studying the characteristics, volume, and quality of that communication phenomenon. *Statistics.com* reported last year that the use of social media worldwide over passed the 2.5 billion of persons, and that the platform more used was Facebook. This specialized Web site says, “In 2018, an estimated 2.65 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 3.1 billion in 2021. Social network penetration is constantly increasing worldwide and as of January 2019 stood at 45 percent.”

Additionally, the use of social media continues growing, including in a cross-platform communication form. For that reason, the new information environment on the Web is very complex. Users of Facebook also are simultaneously engaged with others social networks like Twitter and Instagram, for instance, and they inter-connect all of them to reach a more dynamic and comprehensive message emission.

Controlling The Uncontrollable

This new communicational reality has been creating in recent years a chaotic information scenario, because of the high volume of fake and unconfirmed news spreading. People, without knowledge about the communication phenomenon —mainly regarding technics and ethical responsibility—, send and resend a lot of messages with no care if they are true or not, or if they can affect the moral or reputation of any person.

The result of this new communicational panorama has turned on many alarms in social, academic and political institutions. There are theoretical persons in those fields that have talked about the necessity of establish rules that moderate the use of social media, and, as a result, increase quality of the information flows on Internet.

However, that is not so easy. There are many inconveniences in that suggestion. The most important of them, maybe, is the risk of affecting citizen rights. For example, a new law to control the use of social media —as some political sector propose— can, in many cases, be interpreted in different ways, and also can permit that a government, in extremist, establish some kind of censorship. Therefore, some theoretical of communication are discussing which would be the best way to moderate the use of social media. The key problem with this issue is, usually, that common people believe that they do not need special knowledge about using social media because they think that they only require the human innate communication skills to spread information through the online chattering channels. Nevertheless, it is a quite different and difficult situation. It is not so simple. Users cannot appeal to the argument of human innate communication abilities. Indeed, there are something more important involved —society peacefulness. Definitely, spreading messages requires some responsibility and trustworthiness. That is the reason why many academic researchers are studying, since decades ago, the effects of any kind of communication on people.

Actually, social communication has, nowadays, a different meaning. It has reached a very extreme level of complexity that it is necessary to think about it in the same way that many academics and researchers do in relation to the mass communication process.

Conclusion

A Great Technological Gift, A Big Responsibility

Something is quite clear, social media are a wonderful gift of technology for human beings; but, at the same time, they are generating progressively a very pollute news environment that menaces tranquility of common citizens.

The thesis proposed in this paper is that all people can be taught to use social media in

a responsible way, no matter their age. If a conscious citizen has an early preparation about complexity and potential danger of the communication phenomenon, he could manage messages in a better and prudent manner. For example, all regular schools, colleges, and universities can include in their related citizenship courses basic subjects about the responsible use of social media.

It is, of course, a long-term solution, but there is no other way to bring about substantial changes in the information behavior of the common citizen without violating their constitutional rights. Something similar happened, as indicated earlier in this article, with the journalists who for many years have had to take courses in ethics, media legislation and public opinion in their careers.

The solution, in short, could lie in the early training of new communicating citizens. However, unfortunately such action cannot be expected to be fully effective, because the most important factor in restricting fake news in global communication is the human will. And, regrettably, it is totally unpredictable.

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