

CRITICAL THINKING IN THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS

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Abstract: Fake news and alternative facts have become two very commonplace terms in today's society and they shape or distort people's perception of reality. It is difficult to counter fake news because it is difficult to identify and more and more people fall prey to their content. Fake news alters the way reality is perceived, shapes public discussions, affects the image of institutions and organizations, poses threats for national security by altering the people's perceptions of values and risks. Fake news has become the great vulnerability of our age. One of the ways in which specialists believe that fake news could be countered is by developing critical thinking skills specifically tailored to identify this type of news and to reduce its impact on personal beliefs and values. The present paper aims at detailing and customizing critical thinking tools to suit this goal.

Keywords: fake news, distrust, critical thinking tools, post-truth, post-order

1. Context of discussion

In order to understand the fake news phenomenon and its effects on society it is first necessary to understand the social context in which this phenomenon has gained so much ground and momentum. This context is dominated by a new type of language that uses phrases such as post truth, alternative facts, post order. Post truth was introduced in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016, when it was actually declared word of the year due to its rocketing number of appearances in public discourse and it is defined as adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

"Alternative facts" is a term introduced by Kellyanne Conway (Counselor to the President in the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump) a few days after Donald J. Trump's inauguration ceremony, in a TV interview. On NBC News. And it could be defined as the politically correct term for falsehoods. Post order is the term introduced in the Munich Security Report of 2017 to warn of the dangers that "half-truths, interpretations, conspiracy theories and rumors" (2017: 6) pose to democracy and to security if they begin to be as important and relevant as the truth. This report summarizes the current context aptly when it states that "a post-truth culture makes foreign disinformation campaigns more likely and erodes the very foundation of enlightened debate on which liberal democracies depend" (2017: 8).

Daniel Levitin explains that, although human society has been confronted and has handled misinformation since ancient times, the problem today is the ability of lies and misinformation to spread in society at unprecedented speed. This is the reason why he refers to misinformation in today's society as "weaponized", aimed at and successful in producing "social and political ends we would otherwise be safeguarded against" (2017: xvi).

In this context, fake news has become the go-to umbrella term at present for any situation in which disinformation, misinformation, distortions, blatant lies, propaganda etc. appear and affect the way in which the populations view reality and relations between various states, organizations and institutions. The term as such is vague, and still not properly defined, however, its effects are

felt in all areas of the world. These effects and the tools employed to attain them are not new in information operations, but given the current connectedness of the world and the increase in internet and social media use as both a source and a medium for the instant and far-reaching transmission of messages, for sharing content, for accessible tools to produce, publish and distribute content, the situation has become concerning for both state institutions, private enterprises, media specialists and ordinary people.

One aspect that needs to be understood is that communication itself needs to be approached in a more complex manner in order to understand the fake news phenomenon and to identify means to counter it. It cannot be simply seen as the mere transmission of information from the producer to the receiver via a certain channel. We would argue that the diversity in channels that is available to communicators nowadays has led to the development and increased influence of what James Carey (1989: 16) defines as “the ritualistic function of communication.” That means that communication is a way to represent shared beliefs, to express emotions, to interact not merely with content but also with perceptions, to create certain images or to distort others, to gain superiority, to promote certain attitudes, etc. Content is at present just the framework not the goal of communication.

As Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan explain in the Council of Europe Report entitled *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* “the most ‘successful’ of problematic content is that which plays on people’s emotions, encouraging feelings of superiority, anger or fear” (2017: 7) and stirring these emotions ensures that content will be distributed and redistributed and the feeling of shared opinions and emotions will reinforce the community.

2. What is fake news?

In this context, the term fake news has received a lot of attention from various institutions, researchers, members of the academia, journalists, etc. in an attempts to better define it and to find ways to counter its effects.

The European Commission instituted a High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation to analyze the phenomenon of online disinformation. They favor the term disinformation over that of fake news and define it as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (2018: 3). The reasons why the experts resorted to the term disinformation is that fake news does not encompass the complexity of the problematic as the phenomenon it attempts to describe is neither simply fake nor is it limited to news. The second reason is that the term fake news is misleading and it has been appropriated by politicians and their supporters who use it to serve their own political agendas.

The problem of fake news is and its effects on society is tackled by Wardle and Derakhshan. They introduce another term that they suggest describes more aptly the phenomenon, namely “information disorder”, which they categorize as: “(1) Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant; (2) Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm; and (3) Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (2017: 5).

In our opinion, any attempt to define fake news has to start from the very words that make up the expression. Careful attention must be paid first of all to the fact that the meaning of “fake” should not be confused or superimposed on the meaning of “false”. If something is fake that does not implicitly make it false; we would not necessarily call fantasy false, rather we would refer to it

as unreal. When something is fake it means that it is not genuine, it is not congruent with reality or with a set of standards that have been agreed upon to be the yardstick for what is real. Reality is a convention that reflects people's attempts to perceive and interpret the events, phenomena, situations, characters as closely to what they are as possible. Of course, since our access to reality is mediated by our own personal beliefs, values and knowledge, as well as by the means at our disposal to obtain information about the world and the events that occur, it is difficult to speak of absolute reality.

However, in the media at least, an accurate description of reality is expected, as reporters and journalists are supposed to be impartial observers that correlate observations, verify sources, corroborate information from various accounts, do research into causes and consequences in an attempt to present as clear and accurate an image as possible. Or at least that is how journalism operated in the "era of public truth" (Deac 2018: 32).

Journalism nowadays is more complex, as it is no longer an activity restricted to newspapers, TV channels, radio stations or any other traditional media, but it has extended and actually transferred to the internet and to social media. Wardle and Derakhshan stress the fact that "The rise in popularity of social networks as sources of news has taken place at the same time as a decline in local newspapers in some of the largest democracies in the world." (2017: 50) This view is confirmed by the worrying results of the Edelman Trust Barometer in 2017 and in 2018. In 2017, the report is entitled *Trust in Crisis* and the result it presents reflect precisely this: trust in the media was at all-time record low of just 43% and it was distrusted in 23 of the 28 countries surveyed. The report also states that mass population has gained authority and influence through communication in echo chambers which amplify fear, superiority and anger. Which indicates that facts matter less and that bias is the filter as one in two people state that "I would support politicians I trust to make things better for me and my family even if they exaggerated the truth" and 53% do not regularly listen to people or organizations with whom they often disagree and are four times more likely to ignore information that supports a position they do not believe in. 52% rarely or never change their position on important social issues. In the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer report, entitled *Battle for Truth*, there are vague signs of improvement as trust in news platforms decreases for the first time in several years and trust in journalism makes a small comeback. However, nearly 7 in 10 people worry about false information or fake news used as a weapon and this uncertainty has led to disengagement with the news in general, as 50% of people consume it less than weekly, 25% weekly or more and 25% are amplifiers consume news weekly or more and share or post content several time a month or more. Moreover, 63% do not know how to tell good journalism from rumor or falsehoods and 59% declare that it is becoming harder to tell is a piece of news was produced by a respected media organization.

These results point to the problem that Levitin also addresses in his book *Weaponized Lies*. He identifies two aspects that have led society to this crisis: firstly, language has become obscure as users have started to distort it to serve their own agendas and, secondly, education in critical thinking is lacking and it affects a whole generation of citizens. "These two facts have made lies proliferate in our culture at an unprecedented degree. It has made possible the weaponizing of lies so that they can all the more sneakily affect our ability to make good decisions for ourselves and for our fellow citizens" (2017: ix).

The debate on the nature of the fake news phenomenon and its characteristics is still open and the academia will continue to examine it, however, for the public at large, the terminology is less important than the effects that they feel and the ways in which it impacts their understanding and conceptualization of the world they live in. Consequently, we would argue that the discussions

on terminology are moot as long as the public at large is exposed to the term fake news. This term is the one that should be used if the goal is to develop audiences that are resilient in the face of this phenomenon. Terminological controversies concern solely those who have a clear grasp on the phenomenon, not the general public who only feels the effects of fake news on their social, professional, political, personal lives, and who, eventually, put into practice the desired end results envisaged by those who propagate fake news in society.

Consequently, at this point in time, it is more important to analyze the effects fake news has and the end results it targets, rather than try to extract an exact definition of the phenomenon from the mire of academia scrutiny. The effects we have already presented and they can be summarized as confusion regarding what is real and what is not, what news to trust and which to reject. In this respect, critical thinking can help because it promotes autonomous thinking by encouraging people to examine, reflect upon, analyze, investigate the information they are presented to and develop the resilience that is necessary to cope with fake news.

The most important end results are: misinformation, disinformation, polarization of society, diversion of attention, avoidance of the issue, promotion of emotional rather than rational responses. And in this respect, critical thinking can act a guardian against these end results coming to pass.

3. Critical thinking

Levitin best sums up the reason why critical thinking is important and how it can help separate fake news from real news, “Everyone is entitled to their own opinions. But they are not entitled to their own facts” (2017: x). Opinions are personal and they have emotional overtones, but these should not be confused for facts simply because they are presented as such, nor should facts come second to opinions, because facts are the only ones that the whole public can share and relate to. Timothy Snyder takes the idea one step further, explaining that, “To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis on which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights” (2017:65).

Jurgen Habermas first introduced the concept of “public sphere” which he defined as the shared spaces in which social issues are discussed and from which opinions emerge. This public sphere is vital for democracy to survive, and its main characteristics are inclusivity, representativity and respect. If we combine this theory with Carey’s view of the ritualistic function of communication, we understand that one of the pitfalls that are readily available for the public sphere is that inclusion is very hard to maintain, since people tend to communicate better and more with those who share their beliefs and reinforce them rather than with the ones who challenge them. It could even be said that the filter bubble and the echo chamber are reflections of the ways in which people feel comfortable interacting and communicating. As Wardle and Derakhshan explain, disinformation agents understand that consumers of such messages are more likely to be found in these echo chambers, where there are fewer chances to find people who challenge their ideas. “This means the people who will interpret their messages are much less likely to have an ‘oppositional’ (rejecting the way the message was encoded) or ‘negotiated’ (accepting only some aspects of the message) reading. As such, agents target groups that they know are more likely to be receptive to the message. If they are successful in doing that, it is very likely the message will then be shared by the initial recipient” (2017: 50).

However, as Richard Paul and Linda Elder explain, democracy can be effective and survive only if people are informed about all national and international events, not solely about those that

reflect their ways of thinking. Moreover, in order to maintain independent thinking and to promote critical thinking, people need to be able to recognize “bias in their nation’s news; if they cannot detect ideology, slant, and spin; if they cannot recognize propaganda when exposed to it, they cannot reasonably determine what media messages have to be supplemented, counter-balanced, or thrown out entirely” (2004: 2). But it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify bias and ideology if one is not exposed to differing, conflicting even, views and interpretations so as to measure their own beliefs against them and test their resilience. In 2006, Habermas admitted that the internet has definitely altered the way the public sphere functions “[T]he rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world has tended instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics.” That means that isolation and polarization are much more likely to occur in the age of internet and social media, and that the public sphere is deeply fragmented. Without a sense of collaboration rather than antagonism, democracy cannot survive and what is more, people’s ability to perceive the world properly diminishes greatly. As the motto of Washington Post states, “Democracy dies in darkness” and we would add that social interaction becomes fraught if there is no common ground of shared sense of reality or truth to hold it together.

The idea that fake news affects people’s perception of the truth, of reality and, as such, can have dire consequences for democracies as it discourages open debate and builds trenches between realities that are often incompatible is supported by Timothy Snyder as well who explains that, in totalitarianism, truth can die in four ways: (1) “open hostility to verifiable reality, which takes the form of presenting inventions and lies as if they were facts” in other words, the fake news phenomenon we are confronted with at present; (2) “shamanistic incantation, (...) which depends on endless repetition, designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable.” Another aspect of fake news is that they are catchy, inflammatory and thus more easily repeatable; (3) “magical thinking, or the open embrace of contradiction.” If there is no reality to resort to in order to refute lies, then any story can be embraced even if it contradicts another one that the public had already accepted; (4) “misplaced faith materialized in the form of self-deifying claims.” Many fake news promoters claim that they know the truth, they can explain everything, the solutions they promote are the best and only ones that could work (2017: 68).

So what can critical thinking do to help us with this issue?

In order to answer this question, we need to start with a clear understanding of what critical thinking is. For this reason, we shall resort to a simple and straightforward definition put forth by David Hunter who explains that critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is aimed at deciding what to do and what to believe (2009: 2). In order to decide what to believe, we need to have all the facts, to understand the world around us or at least that part of the world we inhabit. Once beliefs are clear, decisions about actions can become more straightforward since we know what values we have and what we strive for. But decisions about values are the most difficult ones and these are the ones that critical thinking can help us with most. As Hunter explains, critical thinking is first of all reasonable thinking, meaning that “it is sensitive to methods and standards.” (2009: 4) This translates as having reasons to believe certain things and to act in certain ways and once we examine openly those reasons we can more easily identify their flaws or shortcomings and make the necessary corrections. But without this type of open interrogations, they remain hidden, unacknowledged and can subvert our ways of thinking and make us accept misleading information as true or pertinent. There are, according to Hunter three types of reasons that one needs to consider when analyzing a belief or making a decision: emotional, pragmatic and epistemic, none of which should be ignored.

Emotional reasons are based on past experiences, feelings, a sense of community and shared heritage. As George Lakoff explains, we cannot separate emotion from reason, the two are intertwined and to deny that there is emotion involved in our reasoning is to claim that we are not human. Emotional reasons are even more important in dealing with fake news because this is the main type of response that this provokes and it is important to take note of it and to incorporate it in our analysis of the information we are presented with. People are emotionally attached to their beliefs, and if interaction is to exist once more among people who do not share a belief system, then emotions are going to run high and they need to be brought to the surface, understood and openly explained.

The second category, that of pragmatic reasons are based on the information, data, knowledge that can help us reach our objectives in a practical fashion. These reasons focus on the expectations and interests of the recipients and fake news can exploit them in order to gain traction and supporters.

Epistemic reasons are perhaps the most important category in dealing with fake news because they refer to what is real, to what is true. Postmodernism opened the door to endless subjectivity and questioning of the facts to the point that reality has evaporated. However, reality exists still and it is important to understand that although it is relational, that is, it appears at the confluence of our beliefs and knowledge with the events that occur in the world and it is dictated by the way we perceive those events, our perceptions are still limited by what we know, what we comprehend and what we believe. Given the fact that all these elements differ from person to person and from community to community, it is important to accept that these differences do not mean there are no facts and to openly and critically explore not only what we see but also what others see in order to get a clearer image of what is actually happening. Fake news tends to turn everything into relativity and thus to put one interest groups' spin on events and present it as the only acceptable option. In this case, reasonableness in critical thinking means that we need to understand that other perspective may exist and it is important to openly seek them and explore them. As Snyder also explains, we cannot take a cynical approach to reality and truth and simply deny their existence altogether because this cynicism will only lead to growing indifference, a trend which is confirmed by the results of the Edelman Trust Barometer presented above. Snyder explains that it is "our ability to discern facts that makes you an individual, and our collective trust in common knowledge that makes us a society. The individual who investigates is also the citizen who builds. The leader who dislikes the investigators is a potential tyrant" (2017: 73).

The second characteristic of critical thinking is reflectivity, which means that it encourages us to take the time and analyze the problem, break it down into parts, try to see how we could find the best method to reach a solution and how to apply it efficiently. This means that critical thinking "involves thinking about a problem at several different levels or from several different angles all at once, including thinking about what the right method is for answering or solving the problem (Hunter 2007: 5).

Reasonableness and reflectivity both have a common element in their make-up whose importance for critical thinking is stressed by many authors who have tackled this issue: humility. As Levitin explains "Critical thinking trains us to take a step back, to evaluate facts and form evidence-based conclusions. (...) The most important component of the best critical thinking that is lacking in our society is humility. It is a simple yet profound notion: If we realize we don't know everything, we can learn. If we think we know everything, learning is impossible." (2017: xiv) Paul & Elder also explain that human objectivity is merely an ideal that we cannot attain and "It requires a great deal of intellectual humility (knowledge of our extensive ignorance) and begins by freely

admitting one's own point of view, as well as the need to consider competing sources of information and opinion when making important judgements" (2004: 5).

By employing critical thinking with a deep understanding of what it truly is, by combining the three types of reasons presented, by learning to identify them, we have a chance of gaining knowledge, that is surpassing the simple and very acceptable level of emotional responses and following our own personal interests and agendas. And knowledge is important because it is the only link we have to the truth, and the only weapon we have against fakeness. If reasons are clearly identified, then the knowledge we gain is true knowledge and not simply prejudice or pre-judgement. Reflectivity and reasonableness ensure that once reasons have been found they are sound because the evidence has been thoroughly examined. The most important consequence of employing critical thinking in deciding what to do and what to believe is that we become autonomous persons, who can make their own decisions and support their own beliefs, based on facts and not on distortions.

4. Critical thinking in action

The best proof that critical thinking is the best tool to counter fake news comes from Ukraine where the nongovernmental organization IREX trained 15,000 people on a program called Learn to Discern. Its aim was to teach citizens the methods and techniques that could be employed to separate fact from fiction and recognize manipulation and hate speech. In their evaluation of the project, they found an observed 24% increase in participants' ability to distinguish trustworthy news from false news, a 22% increase in those who cross-check the information in the news they consume, and a 26% increase in participants' confidence in analyzing news.

Given that this kind of programs can prove successful in areas in which fake news operates quite pervasively means that it is no surprise that the introduction of this kind of programs in all forms of education has been recommended in the Munich Security Report and in the High Level Expert Group's Report, both of which suggest that info literacy and critical thinking development programs can build resilience in face of fake news. Moreover, the focus needs to be not solely on content analysis but also on source analysis. "Media and information literacy has become an essential competence as it is the starting point for developing critical thinking and good personal practices for discourse online, and consequently also in the offline world. It aims at building a citizenship based on fundamental rights like freedom of expression, and at enabling an active and responsible participation in the online public sphere" (2018: 25).

The next step in our analysis is to examine some of the tools that critical thinking puts at the public's disposal to tackle this task. Paul & Elder propose several objectives needed to analyze a piece of news properly and critically:

1. "Identify the point of view from which a given news story is constructed." Any piece of news reflects the perspective, conscious or not, of the writer who has grown up and matured in a certain society and culture and which informs their decisions and beliefs. "mainstream news is inevitably based on a sociocentric view of the world" (2004: 12) The ideology that is dominant in a culture is not superior to any other, it is simply a matter of social and cultural determinants that exist for different historical and political reasons and it should be acknowledged as such;
2. "Identify the audience it is written for." (2004: 6) The audience will most likely approve of and consume the type of news that reflects the ideology that is dominant in their society.

Once the audience is identified it means that the angle from which the piece of news is written becomes clear;

3. “Recognize what points of view it is negating or ignoring.” (2004: 6) Once the ideology and underlying beliefs are identified, then it is easier to see what has been left out or even rejected. If the omitted information is uncovered, then the issue is put into perspective.
4. “Distinguish the raw facts behind the story from the interpretation and spin being put on those facts. When we do this we are not as easily manipulated.” (2004: 6) In order to identify the facts, one can resort to checking different sites for the same piece of news in order to see which bits of data match. The congruent ones will help to form the image of the facts and the rest can be identified as interpretation and/or manipulation.

These four objectives can be further operationalized into steps to be taken in order to promote critical thinking on a current basis. We have adapted the set of questions put forth by Neil M. Browne and Stuart M. Keeley (2007) so that they could be applied to fake news.

1. What are the issues and the conclusions? Identifying the precise topic of the article the public is presented with is the first step to understand the facts that it is based on.
2. What are the reasons? The reasons we have previously mentioned need to be brought to light. They can be emotional, pragmatic or epistemic and this analysis must focus both on the reasons of the producer as well as on the reasons for which the audience should accept the message.
3. Which words or phrases are ambiguous? As we have previously indicated, one reason fake news gains power is that it proposes an alternative vocabulary, which leads to alternative facts. The key words in the message must be analyzed to see if their meanings are clear, shared by the community or if the producer of the news is trying to introduce a new meaning or put a spin on an existing one.
4. What are the value conflicts and assumptions? This question is related to the second one, but focuses on examining the conflicts that may appear as a result of differing values. As previously stated, beliefs and values are emotionally laden and these emotions must be brought forward in the light of the public discussion so as not to subvert attempts at open communications between groups who hold differing views.
5. Are there any fallacies in the reasoning? This question opens up discussion on numerous fallacies, but the main characteristic that they exhibit is that the link between the information presented and the conclusion proposed is not sufficient, relevant, convincing or even existing. So critical thinkers need to pay attention to how the conclusion is derived from the given data.
6. How good is the evidence? Claims, in order to be well supported need to be based on evidence. However, this evidence can be fraught in several ways that a critical thinker should be aware of: it may be irrelevant to the topic, it may be fraudulent, it may be misinterpreted, it may be distorted by the prejudice and bias of the person who presents it, it may come from a different domain or it may be the result of insufficient study or inadequate samples. These are all aspects that the critical thinker needs to examine in order to determine the reliability of evidence.
7. Are there rival causes? This question focuses on whether or not there could be other causes than the ones presented for the event or situation in question. Our brains are master narrators, which means that we may tend to see causal relations where there are none. So

keeping an open mind and further interrogating the causality relations is important to identify facts and to see the situation as it really happened.

8. Are the statistics deceptive? Statistics seem to be the most objective ways in which statements can be supported and fake news promoters often employ them to project an aura of authenticity. However, one important aspect the critical thinker needs to heed in this respect is that numbers do not speak for themselves. They must be interpreted and in this process of interpretation they can easily be distorted to suit a person's interests.
9. What significant information is omitted? More often than not, information is left out of news coverage simply because of the time and space constraints. However, if that information which is omitted could have altered the way in which the events presented were interpreted, then the critical thinker needs to be aware of this aspect. The first step to determine if information is omitted is to see the news presented shows any flaws in reasoning, that is, if the statements made are supported by the evidence provided. Any gaps may indicate that something was omitted.
10. What reasonable conclusions are possible? A critical thinker is an autonomous thinker and should be able to extract his/her own conclusions from the information they are presented with. This task may seem difficult, but if the previous steps are followed, then alternative conclusions may present themselves readily.

The idea behind all these questions is to keep an open mind, to interrogate and question the information that is given and to repeatedly go through the steps to verify the claims that are made. At first the critical thinking exercise may appear daunting, but through repeated practice it becomes a custom and a new way of thinking altogether that can block the accomplishment of the end results of fake news.

As previously mentioned, critical thinking does not solely mean content analysis or fact checking. It also entails source analysis. And this has two aspects. Firstly, as Levitin explains "Infoliteracy means being able to recognize that there are hierarchies in source quality, that pseudo-facts can easily masquerade as facts, and biases can distort the information we are being asked to consider, leading us to bad decisions and bad results." (xviii) Source quality can be determined by looking into the quality of the news that the site presents, into its track record (how many times it has been wrong in the past and how they have handled those mistakes: by openly admitting to them and providing accurate information subsequently, or by simply ignoring their own mistakes and moving on as if nothing had happened), into the quality and renown of its authors, into the consistency in the type of news they print, into the readership they have. All this information may seem to be a massive undertaking to collect, but once the work has been done, the reliability of the news in question becomes clear.

Secondly, as Snyder points out, "Since in the age of the internet we are all publishers, each of us bears some private responsibility for the public's sense of truth" (Snyder 2017: 79). Each of us can bear part of the burden and check the information we are presented with before sharing it further or even liking it. If readers make sure that journalistic protocols are respected and that they are presented with real news not fake news by volunteering to carry out these critical thinking tasks, then the internet and social media could be a much better regulated public space in which information shared is real.

In conclusion, critical thinking can help prevent the realization of the end states that fake news aims at: misinformation, disinformation, polarization of society, diversion of attention, avoidance of the issue, promotion of emotional rather than rational responses. Misinformation can be avoided because facts are checked from multiple sources and mistakes can be uncovered.

Disinformation can be stopped by uncovering the fallacies in the reasoning and the ulterior motives that the promoter of fake news might have to get the audience's support for that idea. Polarization can be averted because critical thinking means examining the issue at hand from multiple perspectives and understanding all the values and assumptions that it is based on. Avoidance of the issue can be thwarted by analyzing how the issues, reasons, values, causes, statistics and conclusions are related, how they work together to form the narrative that the critical thinker is presented with. If the connection among all these elements does not hold then awareness of avoidance will help the thinker to reject the news as fake. And lastly, emotional responses cannot be stopped, however, they can be garnered, understood, put into context, and eventually controlled so as not to sidetrack the attention from the issue: is the situation presented fake or real?

In the post truth society, the trust that we had in the media in the public truth era is no longer justified. Fake news may be hard to define, yet its end results are felt every day and they shake and even shatter the foundations of democracy and attack the core values that these societies are built upon. Critical thinking needs to be employed in order to develop autonomy, while at the same time preserving those values that make a society democratic. An informed, autonomous, humble and information literate citizen is a citizen who can discern between fake news and real news, who can identify propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, can resist polarizing tendencies and build common ground for communication and conversation with people whose opinions and beliefs do match his/her own, and do so without exhibiting overpowering disruptive emotions such as rage. Critical thinking could build resilience in a community and in a society so that destabilizing forces from within or abroad cannot interfere with the process of communication which is the basis of a well-functioning democracy.

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