



The Truth in Social Media

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Abstract

In the last chapter of *In the beginning was the deed: realism and moralism in political argument*, Williams raised the question of truthfulness in politics and warned that the media, particularly, television, and the market of communication in general, work in ways contrary to truthfulness -understood as the combination of the virtues of sincerity and accuracy. In this paper we would like to carry on Williams' line of thinking in connection with the impact of the new social media platforms on politics. Where Williams focused on television, we will consider the impact of the internet public sphere. After reviewing how the digital social media encourages motivated reasoning in general, we propose to focus on two main phenomena derived from it: the rise of conspiracy theories and the moralization of politics. Conspiracy theories epitomize the risk of self-deception Williams was concerned to signal. On the other hand, the process of moralization of politics triggers sectarianism and hate for the “others”, the outgroup. Both phenomena are not exclusive of the internet sphere, but both are boosted by it, and entail a lack of interest in truth and truthfulness, and in this way they threaten the value of truth for democracy.

Keywords Truthfulness · Democracy · Motivated reasoning · Social media · Conspiracy theories · Moralization

1 Introduction

In the last chapter of *In the beginning was the deed: realism and moralism in political argument*, Williams raised the question of truthfulness in politics and warned that the media in general (and television in particular) work in ways contrary to truthfulness- understood as the combination of the virtues of sincerity and accuracy, that he described in *Truth and Truthfulness* (Williams 2002). Some of the worries he raised have to do with the interest of the media “*in propagating, distorting, concealing, or interpreting the message*” (p. 155), with the noise that often characterizes

the public discourse, or with the transformation of politics into entertainment. He clearly realized that the principle of freedom of speech does not guarantee truthfulness in public discourse, as public speech may respond to other interests instead of the virtues of sincerity and accuracy. He even used the term “conspiracy” (in p. 163) in connection with the phenomenon of collective self-deception.

Williams' effort can be seen as a reaction to post-modernist views that proposed a deflationary notion of truth and a cynical notion of power (Dennett 2000). His vindication of a robust notion of truth and truthfulness places him within the domain of a normative political philosophy, but with a realist twist, i.e., a political philosophy that is not content with stablishing a standard of justice (Rawls) or of justification (Habermas) that cannot be applied in practice -a «realist» reaction that has gained momentum since then (Rossi and Sleat 2014). In the chapter, Williams rejected the notion that replacing freedom of speech with a supposedly authoritative source of pronouncements was an acceptable option to address the risk of manipulation and propaganda for liberal democracies. He rather called for the audiences to be cautious of messages, and barely indicated that this worry “*should certainly have policy implications, with regard to*

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such things as public education, public broadcasting systems, and control of the ownership of the media” (p.161).

In this contribution we would like to carry on Williams’ line of thinking in connection with the impact of the new social media (environment) on liberal politics. Where Williams focused on television, we will consider the impact of the internet on the transformation of the public sphere, and how it triggers motivated reasoning. We propose to focus on two important phenomena derived from this change: the rise of conspiracy theories and the moralization of politics. Conspiracy theories epitomize the risk of self-deception Williams was concerned to signal. We will try to clarify where these stories stem from and why so many people are so eager to believe them. On the other hand, the process of moralization of politics is characterized by sectarianism and hate for the “others”, those members of society that are seen as an outgroup, as improper citizens, whose rights can be overhauled. Both phenomena, while not specific of the social media, are boosted by the internet public sphere, promoting fake news’ viralization, right-wing authoritarianism, an increase of political violence and a whole new disregard for political dialogue and compromise. Indeed, conspiracy theories and moralization do not take place in a vacuum, and are also a product of complex and systemic social dynamics that foster motivated reasoning in the defense of perceived identities at risk (Kahan 2017).

Hence, both phenomena have in common a lack of interest in truth and truthfulness, and in this way they threaten the value of truthfulness for democracy. Williams’ concern that the principle of freedom of speech may run against this value has become more prominent, as some of these platforms have developed protocols to filter out inappropriate messages, and even the closure of some particular channels and voices. However, these measures are marginal, as their rationale is grounded on matters other than on accuracy, much less sincerity. Therefore, given the centrality of the public sphere to liberal politics, which measures can be taken so that it is not put into risk?

2 Truthfulness and Politics in Williams

In the essay “Truth, Politics, and Self Deception” (printed as the last chapter of the book) (Williams 2005), Bernard Williams showed his concern with the notion of truthfulness, the commitment to “telling the truth”, as the key to truth transmission over time and between people. In his own words, “*my interest here will be above all in the characteristics of the message and the medium which are relevant to truth preservation and which are content-related, for instance because they involve interests in propagating, distorting, concealing or interpreting the message*” (p.155).

Thus, Williams took as his starting point the complex relationship between truthfulness and truth that he developed in *Truth and Truthfulness* (Williams 2002), and raised the question of its relevance for politics.

While truth is taken to be a universal notion, conceptually linking belief and assertion, truthfulness concerns the action of “telling the truth”, which requires sincerity and accuracy. Sincerity merely implies that the person who shares a message with another person or other people does so in belief that what they are sharing is true, in other words, that they convey what they believe to be true. Accuracy, on the other hand, implies a careful observation of the medium, attention to detail and a willingness to be precise in the description of what is believed to be true. The question of the relevance of truth for politics revolves around whether truthfulness is a requirement for governments, whether their messages have to aim at sincerity and accuracy. At least some voices would reply in the negative. Williams referred to Machiavelli, who clearly emphasized the protecting role of government towards its citizens as a justification for not telling the truth. From this standpoint, security reasons may justify a level of secrecy, even lying, that is naturally at odds with truthfulness. Hence, is truthfulness a desirable and necessary quality for democratic purposes?

Williams analyzed this important question starting from standard traditional arguments which he discussed schematically. The first argument contends that government accountability prescribes truthfulness. Given the particular advantages that governments possess in the commitment of illegitimate or tyrannical actions, and the ability to conceal these actions, it is in the interest of the people to demand governmental accountability. Accountability, however, can be restricted to qualified bodies, such as parliamentary commissions, rather than applying to the general public.

It follows that something stronger is needed to require truthfulness from governments. The second argument discussed by Williams appeals to the fact that the source of the government’s power is the will of the people. Hence, there is a relationship of trustor and trustee between the people and government, so that the latter has an obligation to disclose its actions, something for which truthfulness is fundamental. However, once again, this is an idealized notion that takes for granted such complicated notions as that of a homogeneous and unified people, something that is not feasible or real, concluded Williams.

In order to complement these two arguments for truthfulness from governments, Williams provides a third argument, which he labelled the liberal argument. This argument is presented in two versions: the minimal version and the self-development version. The former highlights the fundamental importance of freedom and how denial or restriction of information is a violation of a basic and fundamental

democratic freedom. The latter argues that truth is a fundamental aspect of people's self-empowerment.

An important distinction was actually made by Williams at this point between governmental lies and governmental secrecy. Williams argued that secrecy might well be more justified than untruthfulness on behalf of the government, given that the management of the people's security might indeed justify decisions whose public disclosure would entail a potential threat to the people. An equilibrium is required between the level of secrecy that is needed in order to execute difficult decisions on behalf of the people, and the level of disclosure that is fundamentally necessary to guarantee accountability and transparency. This equilibrium is not an objective tipping point, but one which is responsive to the people's demand to be properly informed. In Williams' own words: *"the government's behavior in information management depends not just on the degree of curiosity, but also on the public's expectation of government"* (p. 159). It is the people who can shape the degree of accurate information that is needed to both hold the government accountable and, at the same time, provide it with the ability to make difficult decisions on its behalf that might need to be concealed.

It is here that mass media enters the picture, as it voices the demands of the people, and may hold the trigger to push them. Hence, its role as democracy's fourth power. From this point of view, the role of the mass media would be to mediate between both principles, to ask from the government as much information as the people expect and demand, while at the same time being aware that some topics may need secrecy.

However, Williams showed skepticism towards the notion that mass media can properly fulfil this function, given their interests (competition for audiences through entertainment, hidden agendas of private interests through ideological influence) and its righteousness with regard to how government should be implemented. It is precisely here where a divide between the right to the truth clashes with the right to freedom of speech: the media's aforementioned intrusiveness and righteousness might work in the opposite direction to the attainment of truth. Williams asked *"to what extent given practices based on the value of free speech also serve the values of truth and truthfulness"* (p. 160). Therefore, the fundamental freedom that consists of being able to say or ask anything, together with the argument against any kind of intervention or regulation of a basic good in the market, can greatly undermine the right to truthfulness in liberal democracies. Williams was concerned with the noise generated by TV's fierce competition between messages for attention and their ability to cancel each other out, and the people's lack of context with regards to the understanding of these messages.

In our view, social media exponentially magnifies the tension Williams identified between the media's right to free speech, and its role as the watchdog of government accountability, as we will argue. To finish this section, let us just mention that Williams cursorily underlined the importance of education in the formation of citizens willing to demand truthfulness from governments. Highlighting the old Enlightenment ideal, Williams posits people with a vested interest in the truth and an ability to distinguish it from ideological messages, citizens who are also aware of the market pressures that affect the media. He also referred to the importance of public broadcasting and of limits to media control and ownership -measures of democratic health which we will discuss in the last section.

Finally, Williams alluded to the citizenry being taken hostage by self-deception, when one confounds what she desires to be true with truth, a form of wishful thinking. Presciently, Williams considered the possibility of collective self-deception, and he described it as a "conspiracy", as a result of mass media market and ideological interests. Before discussing conspiracy theories, and social media's role in their generation and diffusion, we analyze the workings of wishful thinking or- as it is also known- motivated reasoning in the next section, in order to more thoroughly explore these risks that Williams just mentioned.

3 Motivated Reasoning and the Impact of Digital Social Media

As Williams rightly observed, the attitude people have with regards to the truth determines their activity of searching for accurate information. This attitude has been much studied since Kunda's pioneering work (Kunda 1990). Kunda distinguished between motivated and accuracy reasoning. Motivated reasoning consists in a bias towards information that either confirms one's own beliefs (confirmation bias), and/or against information that undermines them (disconfirmation bias). Motivated reasoning protects people from the discomfort that is originated when one finds out that they are mistaken or that their beliefs are somewhat flawed, or that their social identities are at risk (Nyhan and Reifler 2019). Conversely, accuracy reasoning aims at approaching the facts of the world as accurately as possible. The people who engage in it are aware of the complexity of the facts and of their prejudices. In the political context set by Williams, it requires a conscientious and thorough job of filtering noise, searching for more information and an effort at putting the pieces together. This goal involves a far bigger cognitive effort and time consumption than motivated reasoning, as people who engage in accuracy goals have to process a much greater amount of information, and need to

restrain from their natural tendency to pay attention only to what confirms or reinforces their own beliefs or ideology.

Our point here is that the new informational environment- made possible by the outburst of the internet and the emergence of digital social media- reinforces people's spontaneous tendency to motivated reasoning, fostering phenomena such as the rise of conspiracy theories and the moralization of politics, which amplify Williams' skepticism about (social) media and the ideal role it should play for democracy.

Historically, the media ecosystem provided information seekers with a definite set of outlets, such as newspapers, radio or television, through which to navigate their desire for information. These outlets provided them with a number of alternatives based on certain types of ideology, but the media ecosystem was somehow regulated by the professional deontology that governed its news coverage. Needless to say, this deontology was breached in numerous cases in the production of entertainment or the pursuit of corporate or political interests, but market competition for the information commodity was limited to the outlets who had the prerogative to break the news. The new social media news ecosystem has triggered a radical transformation of this setting.

To begin with, where the transmission of the "truth" was limited before to a number of professionals who had the responsibility to mediate between world events and information seekers, social media platforms allow for anybody with the ability to connect to the internet to perform this task. People do not have to accredit any sort of professional title to be able to produce content: anybody can. While at first sight this was seen as the democratization of news production, and the possibility to overcome the corporate interests that may lay behind traditional news outlets, it is now clear that it has made the distortion of the "news"- for commercial, political or social reasons -possible for interested individuals or parties. Furthermore, it has enhanced the speed with which they can do so.

A second transformation concerns the immediacy or urgency that these platforms provide in the production, sharing or consumption of news. Traditionally, the news cycle was longer, from the actual events taking place, to the reporters finding out about the event, to the actual news coverage and final publication on newspapers. As technology developed, the news cycle shortened, first with radio coverage and then with that of television. However, there still was a certain time lapse between the event and broadcasting it on tv. Smartphones and social media allow for people to immediately post events as they happen live, something that greatly fosters people's natural default setting towards motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is connected to the release of dopamine (Westbrook and Braver 2016; Schmack

et al. 2015), so that fast processing of congenial information is intrinsically rewarding and addictive. Similarly, sharing information with likeminded people on one's networks is also rewarding, as dopamine is also released when one's posts are eagerly liked, shared or commented by people who share one's ideology or beliefs.

A third transformation concerns the disappearance of the journalist's role as mediator between government and the public. Historically, political parties and politicians had to confront the guardian role that reporters applied to them. Their statements or actions had to forcefully confront the media's filter in order to reach a wide audience. With the arrival of social media platforms, politicians can circumvent or completely erase the media's role as political watchdogs. Nowadays, they have an unregulated and completely direct channel of communication with their audience, potentially exploiting two of the drivers of motivated reasoning: partisanship (Bolsen et al. 2014) and prior-issue opinions (Mullinix 2016). Thus, politicians can freely shape their preferred narratives from their new strategic pulpits and address their partisans directly, thus confirming their desire for belief confirmation. Similarly, prior-issue opinions also greatly matter in terms of encouraging people to engage in motivated reasoning. When one comes to care deeply about some issue, whether because of its salience during the political socialization period (Zaller 1992), religious orientation, ideological motivation or as the result of a highly polarized environment in society, the need to search for information with which to confront uncongenial news or confirm one's beliefs is exacerbated.

Social media platforms foster and enhance access to echo chambers (Garimella et al. 2018), closed online bubbles where people only engage with other people, groups or sources who are ideologically congenial. These echo chambers provide the perfect platform for political manipulation and promotion of extremism (Garimella et al. 2018; Farinelli 2021). They foster direct channels between people and organizations that have a vested interest in creating, sharing or distorting information for different reasons (social, commercial, political or psychological), and a vast amount of information seekers and broadcasters.

Fourth, people who have a vested interest in manipulating their audience on social media take advantage of the algorithms and content production tools these sites award them (Huszar et al. 2022). The algorithms used by platforms like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram have been designed to exploit their ability to collect, process and store the data trace that their users leave when engaging online. This, in turn, provides these platforms with a path to the addictive reproduction of information and content that fits the data trace that users leave online, thus imprisoning them in closed networks of information that have nothing to do with

the pursuit of accuracy. Furthermore, these platforms have also enabled the creation of automated accounts or “bots” whose mission is to streamline the creation, distribution and viralization of false or unsubstantiated content (Howard et al. 2018). In other words, the new digital environment and the technology it uses has not only enabled the exchange of immediate and instantaneous information that shortens the news cycle and bypasses the checks and norms that regulated it in other communication networks, but it has also fostered the diffusion of fake automated sources and accounts that expedite the creation of deliberately false or manipulative content. Combined with the collective self-deception that Williams was so worried about, that of motivated reasoning, digital media have now become the perfect sites for content that is designed to generate emotional responses in its readers, responses that foster moralization and extremism (Bernstein and Gomila 2022). This content often takes the form of fake news, political misperceptions and conspiracy theories.

Fake news is defined in the literature as “*fabricated information that mimics news media content in form, but not in organizational process or intent*” (Lazer et al. 2018 p. 1094). Hence, it bypasses editorial and journalistic deontological norms in order to deceive, mislead or manipulate people into believing inaccurate or blatantly false information. Two types of fake news are distinguished depending on the intentionality that lies behind them: misinformation consists in sharing or spreading false news inadvertently; disinformation consists in purposefully creating or sharing information with the clear and unambiguous intention of deceiving or manipulating an audience. Fake news has skyrocketed in the new social media environment in the last decade (Lazer et al. 2018). Moreover, the most extreme examples have the potential to crystallize in more stable and pernicious beliefs, such as political misperceptions and conspiracy theories.

Political misperceptions are “*factual beliefs that are either false or contradict the best available evidence in the public domain*” (Flynn et al. 2017). The people who hold them believe that they are based on facts and hold them with a high degree of certainty. They have the potential to distort the public debate, lead citizens to act on false or unsubstantiated beliefs, or be used by political elites to manipulate the citizenry. Furthermore, they have proven hard or impossible to correct for ideologically extreme people (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Thus, they are quite stable predispositions that can undermine people’s approach to the public sphere, influence their search for other related topics, or promote further political misperceptions or conspiracy theories. It is precisely conspiracy theories that we want to focus on in this paper, as the epitome of the collective self-deception that Williams alludes to, something that has been greatly

enhanced by this new digital environment that hyper-encourages the type of freedom that can be so damaging to truthfulness.

4 Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are defined in the literature as explanations for worldly events that involve the secret machinations of a powerful group of people who conceal their involvement in them (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008). “*They are morality based tales based on archetypical narratives of right versus wrong, good versus evil*” (Farinelli 2021 p.4). They provide those who believe them with very powerful and attractive stories that can help generate a deep sense of social belonging amongst those who hold them (Ren et al. 2021), a sense that feeds off the strong rejection of any kind of official storyline or source of information and those who abide by them. By their own nature, conspiracy theories undermine or threaten Williams’ definition of truthfulness, because they have an extremely dogmatic component or understanding of the truth, one that is based on a general tendency for wishful thinking instead of sincerity, and a number of mistaken inferences driven by cognitive biases instead of accuracy. This conception of the truth accepts no alternative accounts or possible rebuttals, for they represent an indication of the conspiracy itself. Said differently, conspiracy theorists believe to have discovered a hidden truth so powerful and authentic that it does not accept any kind of nuances. Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) call this the self-sealing quality of conspiracy theories, one that is based on the belief that anyone who opposes or denies their account is, therefore, part of the conspiracy.

Although, in this sense, conspiracy theories stand the test of the argument against tyranny, given that they are based on the conception (and necessary condition) that those who hold power are automatically inclined to withhold the truth from the people and act against their interest, they do not contribute to truthfulness. They stem from a number of motivated cognitive biases and a crippled epistemology (Hardin 2002), as the people who believe conspiracy theories have a general rejection or absolute disregard for the institutions or organizations in charge of producing bodies of knowledge. This is referred to in the literature as conspiracy thinking, a tendency to believe that “*authorities are engaged in a motivated deception of the public*” (Wood et al. 2012 p.2). This is supported by research that proves that believers in one conspiracy theory are likely to believe in others (Douglas and Sutton 2008).

One of the most powerful aspects of conspiracy theories is that they often provide simple explanations to sociologically complex phenomena. According to Douglas et al.

(2017) “belief in conspiracy theories appears to be driven by motives that can be characterized as epistemic (understanding one’s environment), existential (being safe and in control of one’s environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group)” (p. 538). All three motives stem from a desire to project the kind of wishful thinking or self-deception that Williams denounced. The first motive is deeply influenced by the aforementioned tendency that people have to seek ideologically coherent information, one that justifies one’s ideology or identity. The need to feel in control of one’s environment is also a source of motivated thinking (Brotherton and French 2015). Although not in their entirety, conspiracy theories are often born as a result of the need for cognitive closure in face of some traumatic collective event that disrupts people’s sense of personal security, stability or order, such as terrorist attacks, pandemics or magnicides (Leman and Cinnirella 2013). When this happens, people tend to activate a number of mechanisms that help them cope with the anxiety, fear or distress that result from a perceived loss of control. These biases represent mental shortcuts that provide people with answers to this need for self-deception or wishful thinking, shortcuts that fail the virtue of accuracy (Kahneman and Tversky 1982).

For instance, people often resort to what in cognitive psychology is known as pattern recognition bias, a tendency to draw connections between actions or events that are apparently unrelated (Brotherton 2015). This stems from the evolutionary priming effect that helped our ancestors establish connections between an initial stimuli and another stimuli, providing them with a causal link that helped them navigate their environment, understand threats and opportunities and strategically plan ahead (Shermer 2008). Another cognitive bias that helps people navigate their anxiety is intentionality bias, the tendency that people have to believe that behind every action or event there is somebody who planned it or consciously carried it out (Brotherton and French 2015). Again, this belief stems from a lack of a desire or ability in the person who holds it to interpret these events as the result of randomness or a combination of multiple different variables or motives, inasmuch as this interpretation involves greater cognitive effort or resources (Rosset 2008). Proportionality bias, or the tendency that people have to believe that behind every event there has to be an explanation that is proportional to it in size or importance, is another cognitive bias that helps explain belief in conspiracy theories. In Brotherton’s words, “when something big happens, we tend to assume that something big must have caused it” (2015). In sum, when people face uncertainty or feel that their sense of control is under threat, they activate a number of mental processes that are unconcerned with the virtues of sincerity

and accuracy, inasmuch as they offer fast, effortless and satisfying answers to complex situations.

Conspiracy theories also provide strong social incentives to those who hold them, either because they help reinforce their self-image or because they satisfy a collective identity and belonging (Douglas et al. 2017). As mentioned above, conspiracy theories are extremely dichotomic, where a strong divide or isthmus separates those who believe them and those who do not. Furthermore, they often stem from a number of variables that correlate with social marginalization (such as paranoid thinking, ethnic minority status, powerlessness, narcissism, superstition...) and that foster the need in people who feel it to frame a narrative that allows them to protect their group, reestablish themselves in a community or create a new one based on a negative portrayal of the common enemy. Hence, it stands reasonable to establish a connection between these social strategies and the collective self-deception that Williams warned about, for truthfulness tends to be sacrificed in order to socially protect the in-group. This derives from the polarized or Manichean conception of society that conspiracy theories encourage, one where other groups are conceived of as enemies, rather than adversaries. Contrary to the conception of truth as the necessary condition to establish a relationship between trustor and trustee, the people and the government, there is a general conception of the government as alien to the people, a conniving and treacherous enemy of the in-group, whose intention and *raison d’être* is to act against it in complete secrecy. Furthermore, there is no empowerment in the light of the truth, but rather an empowerment born out of the tribal need for acceptance, protection or survival.

Now, how does the new social media environment encourage conspiracy theories? An academic debate has taken place on this issue, between authors who argue that conspiracy theories have always existed and have not spiked as a result of the advent of the new digital environment (Uscinsky and Parent 2014), and other authors who argue that social media platforms, together with the global pandemic that started in 2020, have resulted in a conspiracy theory epidemic (Dow et al. 2021). Although it is true that conspiracy theories have always existed and that they were somewhat pervasive before the arrival of social media platforms, we think the evidence is clear that digital media have provided conspiracy entrepreneurs -who have a vested interest (economic, social, political) in propagating conspiracy theories-, with an almost completely unmediated platform, one that, as explained before, fosters directionally motivated reasoning and online bubbles plagued with misinformation (Hyzen and Van den Bulck 2021). That is to say, whereas conspiracy theorists had a limited access to communicating with other conspiracy theorists before the arrival of the internet, social media platforms have provided

them with instant, unregulated and limitless communication channels with like-minded people, expanding the outreach on conspiracy theories globally. Furthermore, conspiracy theories involve an entertainment component, something that increases the appeal to believe and share them online under these new market conditions (van Prooijen et al. 2022). Another example is when people share conspiracy theories on social media based on whether they believe this will generate greater social engagement (Ren et al. 2021). Also, people will be more likely to share conspiracy theories online when they feel that this will foster a positive impression on other people (Green et al. 2023).

Similarly, from the consumer side, social media platforms make it easy for the people with the fears and doubts we have described above, to find the sort of material that satisfies their needs. To begin with, social media platforms provide isolated and socially marginalized people with a tool for acculturation. As mentioned earlier in the paper, people- who felt socially isolated and cognitively threatened by the Coronavirus pandemic and the public health measures that governments applied- used social media to search for answers with which to appease their anxiety and connect with other people in the same situation. This, led to an increase in conspiracy theory belief (Dow et al. 2021). Social media also helps people who are feeling politically disenfranchised connect with likeminded people in their countries or around the globe and form conspiracy communities online (Cosentino 2020). Collective narcissists-people who feel that their in-group (national, ethnic, ideological...) is extraordinary and that it does not get the recognition it deserves (Golec de Zavala et al. 2022)- use the possibilities that social media grants them to reinforce their communities through theories that enhance their identity while blaming others for their lack of recognition. People who are feeling powerless, or that their social group has lost power in their country, also use social media to vent their frustrations, connect with potential peers and exploit the social potential that conspiracy theories grant them. People who feel that their identity (social, ethnic, political or ideological) is under threat- known as system identity threat (Federico et al. 2018)- also find solace in narratives that place the blame on out-groups and provide them with a new and revitalized identity, one that often leads to extremism (Noury and Roland 2020).

In summary, market conditions together with the technological advantages (algorithms, bots, internet anonymity) of social media platforms have created a world where truthfulness is under siege.

5 The Moralization of Politics

Moreover, this environment of fake news, political misperceptions and conspiracy theories has fostered a highly volatile political landscape, one characterized by the moralization of politics, and the sectarianism and polarization that ensues, including hate and dangerous speech (Mondal et al. 2017). Although political polarization has always existed, it historically revolved around policy differences, so that people found themselves on different sides of the political spectrum based on their different takes (Finkel et al. 2020). But the current moralization of politics is different in that it consists of the moral disqualification of rivals. In these authors' words "*this type of polarization focuses less on triumph of ideas than on dominating the abhorrent supporters of the opposition party*" (p. 1). That is to say, politics have been bestowed with a level of tribalism that conceptualizes the world as a matter of "us versus them", "good versus evil". This new type of polarization, labelled political sectarianism, has three core ingredients: (1) othering; (2) aversion; (3) moralization (Finkel et al. 2020). Othering refers to the tendency that highly polarized people have to consider anybody who thinks differently or with different ideological predispositions as foreign or alien to them, clearly delineating opposite sides. Aversion comes from the natural tendency to, once this divide between groups has been established, reject or distrust the people who are not part of the in-group. Moralization is the core ingredient of this political sectarianism, because anybody who does not belong to the group and who, therefore, lies outside of the tribe, is morally perverse, insidious or mean. Nowadays, normal political affairs have been turned into questions of honor, creating an honor culture similar to that used by terrorist groups, crime syndicates or religious sects to justify their violent actions. Thus, political discourse is vested with a highly Manichean conception of affairs, one where everything is susceptible of being defined in terms of what is right and what is wrong or perverse (Ryan 2017). This, in turn, increases the thirst for political extremism, which leads to political hatred and violence (Berntzen et al. 2023).

Evidence is mounting that some violent or extremist actions were often preceded by online activity that used highly moralized language (Mooijman et al. 2018; Mooijman 2021). Reaching violent behavior was influenced by two factors: the degree to which people considered the demonstration as a moral matter, and the degree of moral convergence perceived. Social media platforms have enhanced this type of moralization, providing people with highly moralized conceptions of politics and society with the proper channels to directly address their co-religionaries in the aforementioned echo chambers, or with direct channels to insult, inflame or incite violence against their political

opponents. Anonymity is another tool that encourages people to spew hatred online without consequences.

As mentioned before, the public sphere is no longer regulated. People have the incentive and ability to express or pass their judgments freely, without regard to content or intent. Furthermore, some studies showed that the display of moral indignation online had positive social implications for those who showed it (Brady et al. 2021). Erich Fromm famously said that moral indignation, which confuses envy or hatred with virtue, is probably the phenomenon that entails the most destructive feelings (Fromm 1948).

According to Molly Crockett (2017) moral indignation is exacerbated on social media platforms in three ways: (1) they enhance its expression by inflating the stimuli that produce them; (2) they reduce the costs for its expression; (3) they increase the personal benefits for those who express it. The outcome of this incentive for moralization, together with the algorithms, fake news accounts, bots and echo chambers of these platforms, is increased political violence.

This moralization also runs contrary to truthfulness. First, it blocks many people from a desire to access the truth in order to keep those in power in check or to prevent tyranny, as such people may be ready to support a tyrannical government due to their dogmatic and Manichean conception of political affairs. Said differently, when one conceives of somebody who thinks differently as immoral or insidious, truth no longer matters; understanding society in terms of good versus evil justifies all means against the enemy and guarantees the will to control political institutions.

Second, the relationship of trustor and trustee between the people and the government is completely dependent on whether the government and its institutions are responsive to this tribal view of society, that is to say, to whether “our party” is governing. This trust is no longer reliant on the truth and its virtues of sincerity and accuracy, for the mere conception of politics as a zero-sum game where only one party has the right to succeed, govern or have access to power, completely compromises or subverts the need to convey what one believes to be true or make the necessary assessments in order to test its veracity. Third, such a sectarian and polarized society also runs contrary to freedom of speech -which is restricted to those in agreement-, and self-empowerment in using one’s critical abilities to try to discern what is actually true. When people think that the public sphere and the political realm are a battlefield in the moral war against perversion, the virtues of sincerity and accuracy are completely written off.

In sum, the enhanced market conditions of the new digital media environment magnify the warnings Williams raised against mass media and its role in a democratic society. They do so by promoting phenomena like conspiracy theories and the moralization of politics, which in turn have the

power to undermine and erode the legitimacy upon which democratic institutions are built.

6 Proposals

This current state of affairs puts Williams’ conception of truthfulness as a fundamental and irreplaceable element for democratic government in jeopardy. His concern with the media’s tendency to pursue goals that are subject to market conditions can now be seen in an entirely different light. The media’s role as mediator between those in power and those whose appetite for truthfulness is key to holding them accountable has been completely disrupted by the advent of the internet. As we have seen, conspiracy theories and moralization are now a pervasive element in democratic states and societies. They are both based on a total disregard for the principles of truthfulness that Williams posits, threatening democracy itself. Given the fact that they have been reinforced by the social media ecosystem, and that they hold the potential to deepen the chasm of a sectarian conception of society that undermines and threatens democratic institutions, a collective reflection on what measures and policies can be put forward to address this challenge is in order. With the aim of helping counter this trend, we propose a number of measures to address the truthfulness crisis stemming from the new social media environment. These measures try to encompass people’s fundamental right to freedom of speech with the public system’s struggle for legitimacy preservation, and go beyond the fact that some digital measures already constitute a crime (of hate, of incitement to terrorism or genocide...).

We take as our starting point in this regard Williams’ cursory remarks about the difficulty to conjugate a system that completely encourages freedom of expression while at the same time is well adjusted in discovering and transmitting the truth, and his suggestion that “*consideration in this point should certainly have policy implications with regards to public education, public broadcasting systems, and control of the ownership of the media*” (p. 161). In what follows we will expand this suggestion as we think it can be applied to the current situation, even if in its current form it is clearly insufficient.

Indeed, the subject of education lies at the heart of stemming the tide of total disregard for the principles of sincerity and accuracy that derive from news consumption on social media. A great part of the problem with news consumption in general is that the majority of people, although aware of some or most of their political preferences, beliefs and ideology, are not aware of how these represent a biased approach to the news. In other words, most people do not know what motivated reasoning is and how it affects their

ability to reconstruct the facts of the world. They do not reflect on the fact that they are biased, something which in many cases leads to naïve realism, or the belief that politics only accepts one possible correct interpretation, theirs. In the words of David Foster Wallace this constitutes “blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up” (Foster Wallace, 2009). This in turn further locks the person in a closed and self-reinforcing channel of motivated reasoning and echo chambers which increases the likelihood of consuming fake news, harboring political misperceptions, showing propensity towards conspiracy theory belief or conceiving society as a moral battle to be won. All strengthened by the technological mechanisms and market conditions of the new social media platforms. Thus, the first question that needs to be addressed is how governments, institutions and states can foster the type of education that produces “the Old Enlightenment Ideal” of citizens who are concerned with critical thinking and self-empowerment in the light of the truth.

Perhaps the first step towards a proper use of social media platforms (even before addressing motivated reasoning in news consumption) would be to explain to children and teenagers the potential threats that these (and other) technological devices have for their personal development. Some studies prove that these devices are highly addictive and that, used improperly, they have the potential to increase child and teenage depression (Twenge 2020), impair people’s abilities to form deep meaningful relationships (Moqbel and Kock 2018), enhance bullying practices at schools (Craig et al. 2020) or lead to an increase in teenage suicide rates (Luxton et al. 2012). In other words, governments and institutions should explain the pernicious side effects that these devices can have for people’s mental health. It is at these early stages where technological access with no proper regulation can impair people’s health, people’s ability to think freely or people’s proneness to addictions. Once this is done, the next step would be to explain to people (especially at the early stages of the political socialization process) what motivated reasoning is, people’s natural tendencies towards harboring certain types of biases and the great importance that democratic institutions have as democratic safeguarding mechanisms. In other words, to thoroughly explain the different aspects of liberal democracy and emphasize how a public sphere based on the virtues of truthfulness enhances not only a peaceful cohabitation, but also the types of societal and institutional benefits that allow for people to freely develop and thrive. This can only come with an education based on harboring doubt, a constant questioning of one’s own beliefs and an ability and desire to understand other people’s motives and actions. An education then, based on the principles of critical thinking.

Although of great importance, this approach will not be enough to stem the spread of misinformation that leads to affective polarization and political sectarianism. Ideology and profit are the triggers that eventually explain the design of these platforms and the diffusion of falsities. Therefore, some regulation of the social media market is called for to deal with the problems described. In other words, the principle of freedom of speech cannot be understood as allowing -without restrictions- technologies that threaten the principle of truthfulness and consequently, of a democratic public sphere.

This approach is definitely at odds with the minimal version of the liberal argument for free speech and also with the liberal conception of the public sphere as an open market. Contractualist views of the legitimacy of the state require from the stakeholders that reach the agreements respect for each other; views that go beyond a purely formal grounding of the state required recognition for each other. While this is not the place to explore this contrast, both views share the notion that all members of a society treat each other as subjects, not objects, as agents with dignity and value, not somebody to manipulate and cheat. Political institutions are justified when they guarantee the rights of the citizens, and properly regulate a fair and equal access to the common goods (Rothstein 2005).

From this point of view, certain standards should apply in the regulation of these platforms and the new public sphere they give rise to. For example, hate speech and the promotion of violence should be proscribed. Similarly, accuracy checks should be required from these platforms before allowing diffusion of fake news, conspiracy theories,... At the very least, some warning that the content should not be taken as veridical. By analogy with Williams’s reference to a public broadcasting system, the implementation of trustfulness checks on the social media requires a public social media regulator body in charge of establishing a fair, truthful and equal access to the social media public sphere, and denouncing improper or directly illegal activities online. This regulator body would be in charge of verifying the fact-checking mechanisms and veridicality warnings social media would have to implement and to assess the quality of the information shared (at least) by public figures, so that politicians, pundits and other important actors’ statements were evaluated. Bullshit and other forms of derisive speech should not be allowed.

The benefits of this approach to increase truthfulness have already been proved. In an experiment, Nyhan and Reifler (2015) studied whether politicians who were warned that their statements would be fact-checked would refrain from making false or misleading statements. The experiment proved that when politicians are reminded that they are being monitored they are less likely to engage in

strategies opposed to the virtues of sincerity and accuracy. The experiment clearly indicated the need to implement such fact-checking controls over public speech, particularly as regards social media.

A more complex question concerns the algorithms these platforms use to generate echo chambers, the targeting of election messages according to political preferences, and information bubbles we have described. In the words of Rathje, Robertson, Brady and Van Bavel, “*little is known for sure about how social media algorithms work, in part due to the proprietary nature of social media algorithms, lack of transparency from social media companies, and the complexity of these algorithms*” (Rathje et al. 2022, p.3). Some of these algorithms have already been shown to discriminate (Ben-David and Fernández 2016) and a heated debate in AI Ethics is taking place in this regard (Jobin et al. 2019). AI has typically avoided public regulation and promised self-regulation. In this line, events like the massive theft of user data by spurious companies that took place in the United States prior to the 2016 election are a good example of how AI can completely disrupt democratic principles like a fair and free election. Furthermore, new AI technologies like Chat GPT represent a new paradigm for massive manipulation, given their capacity for distorting, falsifying or creating all types of news content, from text to video. Thus, proper regulation of these algorithms is indeed necessary, whether making them more transparent to the public, giving users more control over them or directly regulating their functioning (Rathje et al. 2022). For now, users who are aware of the dangers of these algorithms are construed to strategies of camouflage, where they consciously leave erratic and irregular traces of activity and consumption online so that algorithms cannot figure them out. The type of education that we advocate could, indeed, not only raise awareness to the nature of these algorithms, but provide users with the type of accuracy goals with the potential to undermine them. For now, disclosure of bad practices have already given place to regulations on private data collection and use, particularly by the European Union.

Such regulations do not curtail people’s fundamental right to participation in the public sphere. Only in blatant cases of fake news, one destined to promote hate speech and violence, would this regulator body intervene against people’s right to free speech. However, by encouraging political parties, journalists, pundits and other important members of civil society to agree to be fact-checked by this regulator body, people would be reminded of the importance of establishing mechanisms designed to promote cooperation strategies.

Another possible strategy would be to create a public social media platform open to everyone, one heavily regulated in terms of keeping truthfulness in check. Again, this

public social media platform would be protected from the competitive market conditions that foster the type of entertainment, noise and manipulation that Williams was concerned about, while at the same time allowing for freedom of speech to continue to thrive on other platforms. In other words, the creation of a public social media platform with complete open access would promote the type of cooperation and trust building strategies that the regulator body would, only with a platform of its own. Thus, not being subjected to the algorithms and newsfeed content strategies of private companies. Thus, it would allow for an equal access to publication for parties involved, while ensuring that people in it are presented with fact-checked and balanced statements from participants, promoting accuracy goals. Also, the creation of this public internet sphere would encourage all factions to participate in an institution designed to establish common norms for cohabitation based on fostering the virtues of truthfulness.

While we are aware of the complex feasibility of these proposals, we believe that the political compromise that led to the development of democratic institutions put in place to safeguard democracy is the path to their achievement. Although these proposals are concerned with fostering truthfulness in the virtual public sphere, they do not preclude a more radical approach to address the systemic social inequalities that affect so many internet users sensitive to the online dynamics. The interplay of offline/online dynamics deserves specific study.

7 Conclusion

All in all, throughout this paper we analyze the new digital media ecosystem through the lens of Bernard Williams’ concern for the value of truthfulness in democracy. First, we review the different propositions he posited with regards to the importance of truthfulness for democratic government and its complex relationship with the minimal version of the liberal argument, that which concerns freedom of speech. We argue that Williams’ concern in the context of a media environment dominated by television would now have been greatly enhanced with the irruption of social media platforms. It would, because these platforms have completely disrupted the nature of the old media environment, promoting open access to content creation, streamlining the news cycle to the point of immediacy, erasing the journalist’s role as mediator between the political realm and the general public and fostering technological mechanisms that facilitate manipulation. Furthermore, these technological devices tap into people’s cognitive biases with addictive and numbing instruments that hold the potential to trap them in closed networks of congenial information.

Thus, the likelihood of strategies that threaten the need for truthfulness in democracy has skyrocketed, resulting in a fake news epidemic that has crystalized, among other stable predispositions, in conspiracy theories and the moralization of politics. We argue that these tendencies hold the potential to erupt into tribal behaviors that can slowly but surely erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the type of cooperation and consensus building strategies that lie at the heart of democracy. Therefore, in order to preserve an equal, fair and truthful access to the public sphere, we argue for strategies that, in Williams' words "*should certainly have policy implications, with regard to such things as public education, public broadcasting systems, and control of the ownership of the media*" (p.161).

First, we argue for a public education approach based on the development of citizens according to the old enlightenment ideal, one which informs students of the potential harms that new technological devices hold for their well-being and reminds them of the benefits of critical thinking strategies that promote the importance of truthfulness for democratic cohabitation. Second, we defend a public regulator body in charge of ensuring that social media platforms develop internal procedures in charge of guaranteeing truthfulness, either by warning its users of the veracity of certain messages, providing more transparency for their algorithms, allowing users to have more control over these platforms or directly forbidding content created to promote hate speech or violence. For this purpose, fact-checking strategies, whose effectiveness has already been tested (Nyhan and Reifler 2015), are in order. Third, we support the creation of a public social media platform, one destined to promote the participation of politicians, journalists, pundits and other public figures whose statements are assessed based on the virtues of sincerity and accuracy. Participating in this public social media platform would promote cooperation in light of truthfulness and remind the citizenry of the importance of submitting to certain democratic standards. We believe that the future of the public sphere, one which is so vital to the preservation of liberal democracy, depends on the implementation of, if not these specific actions, others destined to guarantee the virtues of sincerity and accuracy that Williams was so keen on defending.

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Declarations

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