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THE MYTH OF THE VICTIM PUBLIC. DEMOCRACY CONTRE DISINFORMATION

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Do people fall for online disinformation, or do they actively utilize it as a tool to accomplish their goals? Currently, the notion of the members of the public as victims of deception and manipulation prevails in the debate. It emphasizes the need to limit people's exposure to falsehoods and bolster their deficient reasoning faculties. However, the observed epistemic irrationality can also stem from politically motivated reasoning incentivized by digital platforms. In this context, the readily available disinformation facilitates an arms race in loyalty signaling via a public endorsement of fanciful partisan claims. Such a signaling arms race appears capable of derailing democratic decision-making perhaps more effectively than any known reasoning deficiency. Appreciating the role of an instrumentally rational cost-benefit calculus in triggering the disinformation crisis thus appears vital. Examining these themes, the paper contributes to the current debates in political epistemology and democratic theory.

Keywords: Democratic crisis – Epistemic rationality – Fake news – Instrumental rationality – Social media

Introduction

Digital platforms represent an increasingly dominant prism to inform people's worldviews. However, their content does not always induce its consumers' beliefs to converge toward the truth. Perception is on the rise that broadly circulated falsehoods – and the subsequent confusion among the citizens regarding the features of the shared reality – represents a mortal danger for liberal democracy. Numerous observers anguish that the twenty-first century has witnessed a divorce between political discourse and reality on an unprecedented scale. Democratic institutions whose resilience in the face of the epistemic pathologies of politics has been taken for granted now appear surprisingly fragile.

Detection of the possible novel threat to the liberal democratic order has been swiftly followed by numerous policy proposals aiming to neutralize it. I use fake news as a paradigmatic example of digital disinformation to demonstrate how an elitist theme

dominates the discussion on how to proceed. Its central motif is that the bounds of human rationality hamstring regular people's ability to assess the accuracy of online content. The solution thus requires reliance on the benevolent powers that be to stop bad agents from exploiting the victim public. As a result, mainstream policy proposals aim to limit the public's exposure to falsehoods or provide support to bolster its feeble skills in recognizing them.

So far, as manifested by the "infodemic" of false and misleading claims triggered by the Covid-19 emergency, democratic governments remain a long way from resolving the issue. True, it is relatively early in the game, and the jury is still out when it comes to the efficacy of various policies. Yet, the heretofore lack of success may also stem from an overreliance on the assumption of the victim public itself. Or so I shall argue in this paper.

The observed symptoms of epistemic irrationality can result from politically motivated reasoning rather than rationality's bounds. In other words, people may rationally suspend their critical reasoning faculties to further their non-epistemic goals. Broadcasting affinity to the ingroup signature beliefs frequently pays off to an individual in the digital arena of ritualized intergroup competition even when doing so lacks proper epistemic justification. An ostentatious commitment to fantastic partisan claims may serve as a valuable instrument of ingroup loyalty signaling.

My claim is that the presence of motivated reasoning threatens the efficacy of mainstream interventions to the extent that they rely on the public's willing cooperation in the war on disinformation. Facing motivated reasoners, the pretense of the interventions' political neutrality is untenable. The measures, such as fact-checking, debunking, or content quality control, include normative judgments that transgress political fault lines. The public's active resistance to these policies is already palpable. I interpret these problems as indicative of a tension between the elitist skepticism regarding the competence of the public's judgment and the democratic deference to it. I argue that the disinformation challenge requires us to examine the problem of misalignment between epistemic and instrumental rationality. Its solution requires an adjustment of the incentives people face in the digital environment.

A War on Disinformation

Based on a sense of an untoward qualitative shift in the public discourse, concepts like "fake news" and "post-truth" grew in popularity (Vacura 2019). I will use fake news as a paradigmatic example to highlight the most salient features of the mainstream theory. Fake news represents a species of disinformation, as opposed to mere misinformation. One may get misinformed by accident, perhaps on account of a misunderstanding. Disinformation, in contrast, is intentionally created to deceive its recipients.

The first defining aspect of the fake news discourse is that it turns attention not as much towards the individual instances of fabricated reports as to the process of their serial production. In this vein, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) suggest three definitional features of fake news:

1. The *content* of the report is false or misleading.
2. The report's *form* mimics actual news.
3. The producers' *intention* is to deceive and manipulate the public.

Note that it is only the last one that distinguishes fake news as a threat to democracy from, say, a harmless news satire: its producers deceive deliberately and maliciously. These are not regular users of digital platforms who just happen to like or share some misleading story. They are entrepreneurs motivated by ideological or monetary gains to generate deceptive content and circulate it as broadly as possible (Allcott, Gentzkow 2017, Gelfert 2018). For that purpose, they often use innovative dissemination strategies, such as imitating the existing news brands or mixing their fake news with other content to increase its infotainment value.

The second defining aspect of the fake news discourse is that it attributes a central role in the rise of disinformation to digital platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, that act as a catalyst (Grinberg et al. 2019; Lazer et al. 2018). They allow the disinformation producers to circumvent the traditional communication routes with their numerous gatekeepers and crude audience targeting. It is their cheap and accurate targeting of the public's most receptive members that may turn disinformation into a scourge capable of swinging outcomes of democratic decision-making.

The policy initiatives to mitigate the threat of disinformation mirror the emphasis on the disinformation producers and the technological facilitators of their success. Two approaches tend to prevail, *Competence Building* and *Access Restriction* (Špecián 2022, 96 – 97). The former strives to train people, educate them, and provide them with tools that facilitate recognition of the sources' reliability. The latter aims to limit the contact between the consumers of digital content and disinformation: deplatforming problematic sources or demonetizing their content belongs to this category.

The Victim Public

The mainstream policy outlook rests on a theory that puts the public into a passive role of victims. The theory suggests a straightforward causal pathway between the democratic crisis and disinformation: its proliferation leads to the "production of wrongly informed citizens" (Bakir, McStay 2018, 159). The citizen's mistaken beliefs

consequently prevent them from making choices consistent with their interests. Consider, for instance, a political party that wins the election but would be defeated if the voters correctly assessed its leaders' competence, character, or the nature of its proposed policies. However, this explanation assumes a public whose vulnerability to disinformation has been exacerbated by the digital platforms' environment. What is it, precisely, that makes the public susceptible?

The theory of victim public answers the susceptibility question with reference to epistemic irrationality. That might come as a surprise since our first instinct is perhaps to blame ignorance rather than irrationality. However, ignorance breeds random mistakes that cancel out in the aggregate rendering it remarkably benign in democratic politics. That, at least, is a gist of a broadly recognized argument for the epistemic benefits of democracy where "the wisdom of crowds" can be achieved despite relatively low individual competence (Goodin, Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2012). Suppose one is ignorant but epistemically rational. If a spectacular claim is being made, one would demand the informer to provide strong supportive evidence or to place a substantial reputational bet on its veracity. However, disinformation producers neither meet the burden of proof to back their often-outlandish claims nor provide an adequate reputational signal. Therefore, ignorance on the public's side cannot explain their success. If the reach of their message were proportional to their credibility, disinformation peddlers would be out of their jobs.

The theory of victim public attributes the public's scant concern for the sources' credibility to the flaws and bounds of human rationality. The flagship example of its biased operation is the *confirmation bias*, a propensity to preferably search, trust, and remember information that supports one's preexisting beliefs (McIntyre 2018, Sunstein 2017). If people seek to confirm their views instead of testing them, they will find those who cheerlead for the same stance more credible than the contrarians. Hence the proposed explanation that disinformation peddlers succeed "by manipulating their consumers' emotions and tapping into deeply held partisan beliefs" (Gelfert 2018, 94).

As the theory goes, epistemic irrationality opens the door for the disinformation producers to sell stories adapted to the public's prejudice. Unconstrained by facts, quality standards, or ethical principles, they finetune their narratives to cement the various users' divergent perceptions. Where genuine news frequently reminds us that we live in a world of shared factual reality, fake news is free to create imaginary worlds custom-fit to a target audience. Under the influence of disinformation, the different worldviews grow ever more detached from each other until the democratic mechanism, which requires finding a certain amount of common ground, breaks down. Thus, it is ultimately the concern for the bounds of the public's epistemic rationality upon which the *Competence Building* and *Access Restriction* policy pathways rest.

The consensus that epistemic irrationality represents a crucial source of vulnerability to disinformation is broad. However, the irrationality's flexibility remains controversial. To what extent can it be overcome through effort and learning? It may stem from stable cognitive traits that are impossible to change. Such "hardwired" vulnerability could not be cured. To the extent that people are gullible by nature, their ability to discern the credibility of sources and the validity of claims will always be tenuous. Against gullibility, only reduced exposure to manipulative content seems workable on a policy level.

But gullibility is not the most popular explanation of the public's receptivity to disinformation. In its stead, contributors to the fake news discourse predominantly blame naivety: one needs enough experience to learn the suitable heuristics and orient oneself in the established social norms to maneuver successfully around cognitive pitfalls and effectively use the available cognitive resources in the face of an astonishingly complex world. One's cognitive defense mechanisms rely on context-specific cues and require retraining to adapt to novel circumstances. From this perspective, the vulnerability to disinformation is not caused by a principal lack of capacity for epistemic rationality but by the novelty of the digital platforms' environment (McIntyre 2018) and the indeterminacy of its communication norms (Rini 2017).

The naivety-based account of irrationality paints a brighter picture of the public's epistemic capabilities. The victims of disinformation are expected to become resistant as they eventually learn to identify its typical traits in the digital platforms' specific environment. However, such adaptation may proceed too slowly to save democracy. Accordingly, much hope is invested in speeding up the process through educational interventions.

Epistemic and Instrumental Rationality at Odds

Despite its popularity, the theory of the victim public does not account for all the roads towards epistemic irrationality, however. Of course, some people sometimes fail to rationally infer their beliefs from the available evidence because they are gullible or naïve. But humans also violate the precepts of epistemic rationality for the sake of their non-epistemic interests. While an *epistemically* rational agent forms beliefs that best correspond to the available evidence, an *instrumentally* rational agent chooses the best means to achieve his or her ends. The two layers of rationality largely overlap because rational belief formation tends to be a prerequisite of rational action. For instance, a rational decision regarding one's appropriate outfit requires rational expectations about the weather. Nonetheless, the harmony between true beliefs and pragmatic success is not universal.

The possible clash between the rationality's layers can be elucidated using the concept of "rational irrationality" (Caplan 2008). The theory of the victim public sees epistemic irrationality as an exogenous parameter of the epistemic situation. Caplan, in contrast, views it as a result of instrumentally rational choices. His approach represents a creative but straightforward extension of an elementary economic principle that people respond to incentives: if they have incentives that reward irrationality, they are predicted to become (more) irrational.

What kind of incentives can lead one toward irrationality? Consider non-epistemic costs and benefits like the social convenience of having a specific set of beliefs or the intrinsic pleasure that particular beliefs may yield. It is often advantageous to conform to conventional wisdom and pleasurable to believe oneself morally superior to others, even if the available evidence suggests otherwise. Unless these transgressions against epistemic rationality are duly punished by a costly encounter with an unforgiving reality, an instrumentally rational agent will be incentivized to engage in them. In short, the explanatory framework of rational irrationality suggests that the acceptance of disinformation may stem less from a lack of ability to be epistemically rational than from a lack of willingness to do so.

The psychological counterpart of rational irrationality is reasoning motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion or *motivated reasoning,* for short (Kunda 1990). The confirmation bias is not activated intentionally. It passively skews its victim's evaluation of incoming information like a twisted mirror. In contrast, motivated reasoning results from an agent's choice. Accordingly, Bénabou and Tirole (2016) highlight three substantive distinctions between the passive and active triggers of epistemic irrationality. First, motivated beliefs are goal-oriented, while biases skew information processing in a general fashion. Second, a bias tends to result from inattention or lack of effort, but motivated reasoning requires neither. There exists suggestive evidence that it affects sophisticated reasoners more heavily. Third, because pointing out their errors helps the victims of gullibility or naivety but thwarts motivated reasoners' efforts, a challenge to motivated beliefs–not biases–provokes an emotional response.

When it comes to disinformation, there are indeed ample reasons to suspect that the public's attitude is more rationally self-serving than the theory of the victim public would have it (Kahan 2017). Far from being passive victims of deception, people may engage in "identity protective cognition" or *politically* motivated reasoning, shaping their beliefs not in the light of evidence but that of their preexisting commitments to various social groups (Kahan 2015). A single individual's views are not decisive when it comes to large-scale social issues. One does not determine the policy response to climate change or general election results. Therefore, getting these issues right is instrumentally unimportant. In contrast, getting along with one's relatives, friends, and

co-workers is a critical determinant of success in life. Without active affirmation of their cherished beliefs, getting along becomes a difficult challenge.

In short, if people rationally adjust their behavior to their circumstances, the tendency to engage in motivated reasoning to dismiss identity-threatening information and embrace identity-confirming information with little regard for its accuracy should come as no surprise. When the truth has few practical implications while the group membership has many, it is instrumentally rational to deviate from truth-seeking for the sake of self-preservation and prosperity.

The same motivations can be expected to prevail in the digital world, which is even more socially entangled than the physical reality. The likes, the shares, or the growing number of followers provide immediate gratification. These rewards are not only intrinsically pleasurable, given human obsession with social status, but spill over to the outside world through improved career prospects or even increased romantic success. At the same time, if uncareful, one may get "called out," unfriended, or even "canceled," often with dire consequences. As a growing share of personal relationships is established and managed online, maintaining the right kind of one's digital presence is becoming ever more essential (Lieberman, Schroeder 2020).

Therefore, strong incentives exist for an individual to transmit an appropriate signal of group allegiance. Not every loyalty signal is as good as any other, though. Anyone can claim allegiance to any group that currently benefits them and turn their coat once a more attractive alliance presents itself. However, such a freeriding on the group's goodwill may trigger a downward spiral towards a point where cooperation among its members falls apart.

An instrumentally rational audience shall try to avoid such an unfortunate outcome by screening the would-be ingroup members for *credible* signals of loyalty. The signal must be so costly to fake that it is not worth sending unless one is a genuine loyalist. Promoting disinformation, such as fake news, is one possible method of generating it: one burns the bridges to the competing outgroups outraged by the display and makes oneself "unclubbable" to them (Mercier 2020, 191 – 197, 208). Therefore, it is not the inherent believability of fake news that makes it a convenient instrument of loyalty signaling, but its opposite. Just about anyone can advertise they believe something reasonable or probable, but only true loyalists will publicly profess absurd beliefs for the sake of their team (Simler, Hanson 2018, 82).

The hypersocial nature of the digital world is critically important here. The bridge-burning must transpire publicly to be effective. In this context, the key characteristic of digital platforms, such as social media, is that they make it difficult to limit the audience to the ingroup. Offline, one can discreetly tell different people different

things or modify one's tone to fit the occasion. In contrast, online exchanges are always potentially public and context-free. They are also searchable and remain forever on the record. Whatever a user posts, it can become common knowledge now or at any time in the future, often with significant reputational impact. So, in the signaling game between the individual and his or her audience, the veracity of the content shared and liked matters less than its coherence with the in-groups' signature beliefs. True allies are supposed to show their colors ostentatiously and actively preclude any possibility of a future reconciliation with "the enemy."

A Way Out?

The image of the public as passive victims of exploitation by bad agents naturally leads to an expectation of high demand for fact-checking, education in debiasing techniques, or deplatforming of disinformation outlets. As a result, the policy-makers tend to expect that people trained in critical reasoning will appropriately exercise their skills even when it comes to content that suits them politically. Or that fact-checkers' warnings of disputed content will be heeded as useful additional information even when it would be convenient to broadcast the content further on signaling grounds. Or that deplatforming will be understood to indicate a source's deficiency rather than the platform's biasedness.

Nonetheless, the rationally irrational public is not the victim public one might prefer. We should not ignore the possibility that democracy's recent troubles have been largely caused by actions that are rational in the proximate sense. It is not unlikely that many, perhaps most, members of the public know what they want, and they are getting it. Therefore, they have little interest in third parties educating them, verifying the reliability of information for them, offering them different content, or preventing them from accessing the content they enjoy. In other words, the rationally irrational public considers disinformation like fake news a valuable consumer good: its elimination would diminish, not improve, the quality of experience the digital platforms offer their users.

The available evidence lends some credence to the hypothesis that the policy-makers who bet on the efficacy of the competence building and access restriction techniques are over-optimistic in their expectations. Despite the governments' sizable arsenal in the war on disinformation, the news from the frontline is not exceedingly cheerful (Suarez-Lledo, Alvarez-Galvez 2021; Yang et al. 2020). Many have seen fact-checking as the flagship policy against disinformation. Nevertheless, the evidence of its efficacy is inconclusive, especially when it comes to its longer-term effects (Walter et al. 2020).

Not only are many social media users resistant to heed the fact-checkers' warnings, they also attack their credibility. The asymmetry in disinformation consumption between the political Left and the political Right further exacerbates the issue making it harder to distinguish anti-disinformation interventions from anti-rightwing interventions. The platform's allegedly biased treatment of sources has become a recurrent grievance (Stelter 2016). The problem has been particularly salient in the scuffle over Donald Trump's deplatforming.

And indeed, it does not require a free speech absolutist to worry about a situation where anyone can be purged from the public discourse's leading platforms without much regard for due process. After all, once the concept of fake news gained popularity, it was promptly employed as a label to discredit uncomfortable news reports regardless of their veracity (Levi 2018). Also the frequent accusation of committing "hate speech" rests on a concept with a contested definition susceptible to a concept creep (Haslam et al. 2020). The low legitimacy of the platforms' content editors and fact-checkers in the public's eyes would, of course, represent a significant hurdle for the efficacy of policies that presume that these agents will be perceived as neutral, if not benevolent.

Unfortunately, it is easy for the members of an ingroup to see any allegedly neutral third-party intervention as driven by dishonest or downright hostile intentions. And perhaps they are not entirely mistaken. Strictly speaking, no genuine neutrality exists in the political realm. Every intervention will be implemented by someone who inevitably has some interests, group affiliations, and worldviews of their own. With the rationally irrational public, the mainstream proposals' bet on neutrality is their undoing. Any attempt to institutionalize a standard of veracity safe from a charge of politically motivated censorship–embodied in the independent fact-checker or sophisticated algorithm–is doomed to fail.

These issues put the strategy of neutral intervention on a collision course with fundamental democratic values. A liberal democratic ideal is an open marketplace of ideas (Mill 2011), not a marketplace of ideas pre-approved by a presumably benevolent authority. Democracy's normative appeal is conditional on one's trust in the citizen's competent judgment. The trouble with the mainstream policy interventions is that they are based on a doubt regarding the citizens' abilities. They stipulate, even if implicitly on most occasions, that the government–or the digital platforms in its stead–must train the people to think correctly and keep them from being lied to before they can be trusted with making correct political choices. In short, the belief in widespread irrationality is hard to square with the democratic deference to the soundness of the public's judgment.

The notion of a rationally irrational public offers more palatable implications for those committed to democratic values. It suggests that people's judgment is hindered

by weak or subversive motivations, not cognitive deficiencies. The core problem is not with the human ability of rational choice in collective settings but the incentives as they are currently set up with democratic discussion being increasingly relegated to the environment of the digital platforms. Here, the citizens proclaim their stance on issues in a context that does not encourage them to exercise due diligence.

However, because the resulting epistemic negligence is rational, it can be disincentivized. Were an incentive reform transparent enough and adopted using a proper democratic procedure, there is no prima facie reason for it to clash with democracy's foundational values.

Unfortunately, a viable path to the desired outcome in the context of online disinformation remains to be identified. The proponents of politically motivated reasoning come up somewhat short on specific remedies. They suggest exploiting its power for the common good. Such a strategy gives up on a pretense of an independent reality check. Instead, it aims to empower the highbrow discourse within the cultural groups at the lowbrow discourse's expense. A context would need to be established where "personal observation of behavior by members of their own cultural group" (Kahan 2017, 54) moderated people's attitudes. Maybe partisan elites could somehow be recruited to help battle disinformation (Uscinski et al. 2020, 3). So far, however, the features of their proposals remain exceedingly vague. Several critical questions appear hard to answer: Who will orchestrate people's exposition to "factful" ingroup views? Why would the ingroup members be willing to perform as role models? What is the chance that the observers will perceive the display as genuine?

Perhaps more promisingly, the proponents of politically motivated reasoning also propose that the proper cure to the social ills that stem from mass desertion of epistemic irrationality could be provided by deliberative democracy (Kahan et al. 2010, 513). However, a transition to a more deliberative democracy would require a significant reshaping of the current system of political institutions. For deliberation to matter, the citizens must be persuaded to participate in a political discussion under carefully arranged conditions. Any flaw in the setup can backfire badly (Smith 2014). On a scale of modern mass democracies, this seems an enormously ambitious and costly project indeed.

Still, I suggest we build on deliberative democrats' insight by more broadly considering alternative mechanisms that could be implemented to incentivize people's use of their best judgment. There should be no presumption, however, that deliberative democracy in some particular shape–such as Landemore's (2020) open democracy or Fishkin's (2009) deliberative polls–even if ultimately feasible, represents the only workable solution. The techniques that the deliberative democrats offer to solve the

incentive problem may prove too costly or otherwise suboptimal relative to alternative strategies of defusing motivated reasoning. The answer can only be provided by a sustained effort to solve what economists call the *mechanism design problem* (Posner, Weyl 2018), that is, by designing and testing institutional arrangements that align epistemic and instrumental rationality better than the current liberal-democratic institutions do. For the believers in democratic values, searching for the solutions to the mechanism design problem may represent a preferable outlay of time compared to waiting for a technical fix to digital disinformation.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the public as a vulnerable prey to unscrupulous falsehood peddlers shapes thinking about the dynamics of digital disinformation and its threat to democracy. It provides a foundation for most policies that characterize the liberal democratic governments' efforts to bring the epistemic anarchy of the digital platforms under control. However, the public's bounds of rationality may be less crucial than its frequent orientation toward non-epistemic ends, especially in the digital environment. A failure to appreciate the extent to which the public's attitude towards disinformation is embedded in the symbolic conflict among the competing cultural groups has significant consequences regarding the policies' efficacy and their compatibility with fundamental democratic values.

From this broader perspective, perhaps the most worrisome feature of the theory of the victim public is that it, all too conveniently, lays the blame for the democratic crisis on "the bad guys." The motif of a fragile public that awaits the helping hand of its benevolent keepers is not benign. It accentuates the division between epistemic elites expected to preside over the proposed interventions and the gullible or naïve crowd with subpar reasoning capabilities.

I am convinced we should beware of the ideological undertones of this explanation. Yes, the epistemic crisis connected with the transition of our information economy into the digital sphere presents democratic societies with considerable challenges. However, runaway elitism is as detrimental to democracy as unrestrained deference to the masses' fleeting whims. It appears preferable to trust the citizens' competence in rational action even where the implications are worrisome. After all, defending democracy without such trust may prove infeasible. No matter how challenging the task, let us keep searching for an institutional reform that would realign the private interest with the public benefit in the digital age.

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