Social Media: Catalysts of Modern Communication.

Felipe Di Tulio [a], Lívia Eleutério [b].

[a] Faculty of Law Laudo de Camargo, University of Ribeirão Preto, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil, felipe.tulio@sou.unaerp.edu.br

[b] Faculty of Law Laudo de Camargo, University of Ribeirão Preto, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil, livia.eleuterio@sou.unaerp.edu.br

Abstract. Social media has revolutionized global communication, facilitating the dissemination of information on an unprecedented scale, but also creating an environment conducive to misinformation and manipulation. This study looks at how language has been strategically transformed on these platforms to attract and influence a massive audience, often on a global level. The absence of ethical criteria and the lack of fact-checking fuel the creation of "digital leaders", who exploit the insecurities and fears of the public, using emotional and persuasive discourses to strengthen extreme ideologies. These leaders, compared to cult figures, manipulate their followers through sophisticated rhetoric and take advantage of digital bubbles, where like-minded groups reinforce their beliefs and identities. Fragmented and polarized communication on social networks facilitates the spread of fake news and the growth of loyal followers, which, in many cases, can directly influence electoral processes and democratic dynamics. The study concludes that these transformations challenge the foundations of social dialogue, requiring a critical reflection on the role of language and its ability to shape contemporary society.

Keywords. social networks, language, manipulation, digital leaders, cults, appealing speeches, fake news, electoral process, polarization.

1. Introduction

Over time, social networks have become one of the fundamental pillars of global communication, establishing itself as one of the main modern communication vehicles, facilitating the exchange of information on an unprecedented scale, shaping not only the dissemination of news, but also how it is received and interpreted by the public, redefining the way language is used to influence and shape opinions.

In this sense, it becomes essential to critically analyze the impacts of these platforms on contemporary communication, emphasizing how language has changed abruptly and strategically with the aim of seducing a greater number of individuals, often globally, bringing alarming consequences and impacts to society.

The central thesis of the study addresses how social networks, by facilitating the rapid spread of information, create an environment in which the continuous flow of content does not pass through a careful checking system, such as a filter, providing disinformation and manipulation. Such a scenario, characterized by the absence of ethical-moral criteria and the lack of proof of the facts, generates ideal conditions for the emergence of the so-called "digital leaders", who emerge as influential figures that exploit the beliefs, fears and insecurities of the general public, building powerful and seductive narratives, such as those of eventual "terror" or "crisis", capable of mobilizing large contingents of followers and, thus, assisting in the control and mobilization of the masses.

In this vein, language emerges as a powerful tool for the construction of persuasive discourses that, by using emotional and symbolic elements, capture the attention and loyalty of the public.

The article is structured on the investigation and the relationship between the strategic use of language in networks and the emergence of radical ideological movements.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate how language is used in social networks and how it contributes to the formation of digital

leaders, dissemination of fake news and creation of digital bubbles, in addition to exploring the linguistic similarities used by cults. The methodology is divided into three main stages: document analysis, discourse analysis, and data analysis.

In the first stage, an in-depth review of the main concepts addressed in the study will be carried out, using works by classical and contemporary theorists on language and the impacts it has suffered with the arrival of the internet.

The second stage involves a discourse analysis, examining how language is strategically used in social networks to construct persuasive narratives. Linguistic concepts such as rhetoric and language figures and functions will be applied to verify how digital leaders construct their messages, using tactics that even resemble cults. The repetition of simplified messages and the high flow of these for the segregation of citizens and political fragmentation will also be investigated.

The third stage will be carried out by analyzing data made available by the social networks themselves and academic studies. This quantitative analysis will verify data such as the reach of posts and the dissemination of fake news. There will also be an analysis of the behavior of the networks' algorithms in directing content to different digital bubbles, seeking to identify the correlation between the content consumed and the personal and ideological engagement generated in users.

The use and combination of these approaches allows for a deep analysis of language in social networks and how political and digital leaders are formed, along with disinformation, isolation in digital bubbles, providing a broader understanding of social and psychological dynamics.

3. About the Language

For the Greek philosopher Aristotle, effective persuasion depends on three main elements: "*logos*", which refers to the logical and rational aspect of language, in other words, to build an argument it is necessary that the communication must be clear, precise and evidence-based, making it easier for the audience to follow the reasoning in a cohesive way, understanding and accepting the conclusions presented; "*ethos*", in turn, portrays the character and credibility of the speaker or writer, making the speech the reflection of the authority, knowledge and integrity of the speaker, thus being the basis on which the audience trusts the message; and, finally, "*pathos*", the emotional appeal of the argument, a persuasive speech must therefore know how to touch the emotions of the audience, inspiring feelings such as compassion, indignation, fear or hope. According to him, "rhetoric can be seen as the counterpart of dialectics; both deal with subjects that do not belong to any specific science, being more a means of defense and accusation" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 25) [1].

In this way, language is a complex system of signs and symbols used to express feelings, thoughts, and information, being fundamental in human communication. This concept, in modern times, is carried out from the so-called *"functions of language"*, instruments for communication between two or more people and divided into: referential or denotative (focuses on the information that is being transmitted, such as scientific, journalistic and didactic texts), emotive (centered on the sender, aims to express emotions), conative (seeks to persuade the receiver), phatic (maintain the communication channel), metalinguistic (when language returns to itself, explaining its own terms, rules, or structures) and poetics (prioritizes the form of the message, aesthetics, and style).

"Let us analyze the fundamental factors of linguistic communication: any speech act involves a message and four elements that are connected to it: the sender, the receiver, the theme (topic) of the message and the code used. The relationship between these four elements is variable." (JAKOBSON, 2007, p. 117). [2].

Language is the one that transmits the message directed to a specific receiver in order to inform, entertain or persuade. It is the tool that allows human beings to communicate their ideas, thoughts and emotions, building cultures, transmitting knowledge, establishing relationships and, finally, constituting society.

4. The language of social networks

With the advent of social networks, language has reached projections and taken directions never seen before, reshaping communication and influencing new behaviors. Through its system, with a huge range of content disseminated almost instantaneously, it not only connects people, but also enhances the dissemination of information without criteria, reinforcing the so-called "digital bubbles" and promoting disinformation.

4.1 - The social bubbles

The social bubble is a phenomenon characterized by the union of people who share similar ideas, beliefs and interests, thus creating a highly homogeneous content, making it impossible to transmit thoughts and points of view that diverge from what is normalized by the bubble.

"There is a strong correlation between collective and individual diversity, supporting the notion that when we use social media we find ourselves inside social bubbles." (NIKOLOV et. al, 2015) [3]

The consequences are, to a large extent, isolation and polarization, driven by the algorithm of digital platforms, which privilege the display of content that aligns with what the user consumes in their daily lives, as a way to retain their attention, making them stay longer on the social network. This logic benefits the platforms that gain from advertising, offering products and services that the consumer is interested in, thus keeping them with a limited and polarized view of the world.

4.2 - The Fake News

By absenting any rigorous checking filter, the circulation of false content is facilitated. The platforms prioritize the engagement and viralization of posts, aiming at the profit they can generate. In this bias, language plays a crucial role in persuasion for the construction of disinformation, using rhetorical techniques that appeal to the audience's emotions, beliefs, and insecurities.

A study by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) revealed that fake news spreads six times faster than true news on Twitter, and is 70% more likely to be retweeted. In addition, false content involving politics was the most shared compared to other topics, such as natural disasters or financial issues.

Another relevant data is presented by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who estimate that, during the 2016 US presidential elections, fake news on Facebook generated more than 38 million shares, likes and reactions. Fake news pro-candidate Donald Trump received three times as many interactions as candidate Hillary Clinton. [4].

Simple or appealing messages on the internet are often manipulated to appear authentic or urgent, so that they are more easily shared and believed.

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Therefore, language, in the digital environment, becomes a dangerous tool used to shape narratives and influence mass behaviors, contributing significantly to the fake news pandemic experienced by the modern world.

4.3 - The transmissibility of the message

The ease and speed that messages have to reach a large audience on social networks are the main characteristics of the platforms. Therefore, anyone, from anywhere in the world, can share their point of view with other users from different places. The ability to share a post made by someone else also significantly increases visibility, allowing a post to get thousands, or even millions, of views in seconds.

As Castells points out, networks constitute "the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of the logic of networks substantially modifies the operation and results of the productive processes and of experience, power and culture." (CASTELLS, 2013, p. x) [6].

5. On the language of leaders

Leaders use language strategically, designed to influence and mobilize their followers, while reinforcing their authority and credibility by adapting their speech to the context and the means of communication. On social media, this strategy is clear, direct, and emotionally engaging, designed to create connection by amplifying its influence.

5.1 - The fanaticism

Fanaticism is characterized by a blind and irrational adherence to an ideology cause or figure, being fed by discourses that expose intense emotions, taking advantage of them, such as fear, hatred and admiration, to maintain idolatry and submission. Leaders take advantage of this concept by using language that reinforces the unconditional devotion of their followers, often creating a narrative of moral, physical, or charismatic superiority that isolates and excludes divergent viewpoints.

In the world of networks, fanaticism is driven by the reach that platforms offer, where the constant repetition of messages along with the feeling of belonging to a group linked to digital bubbles, reinforce devotion to leaders or important figures, often elevating them to an almost divine status.

Minds that recognize this phenomenon, extremely old in society, have realized that, with the internet, the message they want to spread and the individuals they want to capture has become easier. Leaders, therefore, take advantage of the structures of the internet to get their ideology to reach the sender of the message.

In contemporary times, such facts create an environment conducive to the strengthening of obsessive and polarized behaviors, segregating individuals and binding them to the leader's ideologies, not being able to detach themselves or look at the other.

5.2 - The Politics

Language plays a very important role in politics, especially during elections, where it is used to shape narratives, influence public opinion and persuade voters. Politicians use strategic language to convey their messages and ideologies, appealing to the emotions and values of voters and, currently, taking advantage of their "imminent fear". This phenomenon was repeated several times in various places in the world, for example, in Brazil, where, on

several occasions, candidates or even representatives already elected used the population's fear of a "communist threat" to convince them to obtain their votes and remain in power, as in the Cohen Plan (1937) and other elections.

Persuasion is key in this process, as it involves the use of rhetorical techniques that can turn promises into convictions and create an emotional connection with the audience. The internet has revolutionized politics by providing new forms of direct communication between candidates and voters, without the mediation of the traditional press. This fact allowed the rapid dissemination of the message and the creation of highly segmented digital campaigns, which speak directly and specifically to the interests of different groups. However, this new dynamic has also driven polarization, with the formation of digital bubbles, in which users are exposed only to selected content based on their interests and that, in this way, confirm their preexisting beliefs.

In elections, the internet and language have changed the game by facilitating the dissemination of information, the use of memes and slogans that simplify, but also amplify, complex issues, and the viralization of content that quickly influences public opinion. The shift has made campaigns more dynamic, but also more volatile, where the ability to persuade and manipulate perceptions in real time has become crucial to electoral success.

A December 2016 Pew Research Center study found that about two-in-three U.S. adults (64%) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events. [7]

A study by Pennsylvania State University (PennState) also concluded that the more people turn to social networks to get news, the more digital influencers start to compete with traditional media. [8]

"Social media influencers have a more extreme effect on the rest of society, according to the researchers. As more people turn to social media for their news, influencers and traditional media outlets begin competing for the same audiences. To stand out from the crowd and attract more followers, influencers distort their messaging." (PennState, 2023)

This political system strictly linked to social networks also creates enormous electoral insecurity. This is because there is a large flow of information that is "thrown" in the face of the voter, added to the tendency to create "cuts" to go viral on the networks. The immense amount of content together with the intention of only drawing the attention of the general public to obtain votes, create an even more conducive environment for fake news and

idolatry, currently widely used to win elections. Politicians, knowing the tools of the networks and what the public wants to hear, no longer have criteria as to the veracity of what they say, nor do they assume responsibility for it, they only take advantage of the circumstances to attract more and more voters and obtain a long political life.

5.3 - The Cults

The term "cult" is used to describe groups whose practices are extreme and abusive, being seen by society as dangerous and manipulative. These practices consist of the significant abuse of power by the leader, who use techniques such as mind control and brainwashing to subdue their participants. In addition to many bringing, in documented cases, absurdly disturbing practices, early and forced sexual initiation and marriage between children and adults. Some leaders may even coerce their members to write letters to their loved ones, assuring them they are fine and their participation in the group is completely voluntary, with the intention of avoiding any kind of external intervention or rescue attempt.

"Painfully, these people discovered that their guru was nothing more than a man poisoned by an addiction to a cult much larger that his own- the cult of attention received on social networks. (...) Massaro's movement existed only to satisfy his own desire for worship" (Montell, 2021, p. 225). [9]

The services are attended by a charismatic leader, who often shows great confidence and persuasion. Through their charm and charisma, such leaders are able to conquer an inexplicable devotion, in order to support and defend their ideas unconditionally, with their lives, if they are told so. These leaders appeal to the emotional, creating insecurities to implement a hope of belonging, convincing their followers they have unique knowledge, with divine revelations, becoming an authority in the environment. They also distance their participants from the rest of society, creating a Manichean narrative, in which they divide the world between "us", the elect, and "them", the corrupt and deceived. To do this, they use a lot of repetition and indoctrination, in order to encrust themselves and make their idea more attractive to those who listen to it.

In reports from people who participated in extreme groups, many cite the power of conviction that leaders and their submissives have when bringing in new followers. An example of this is brought up in Amanda Montell's book, Cultish: the language of fanaticism (2021, p. 17), in which Tasha Samar, a former participant of the Healthy, Happy and Holly Organization (3HO), talks about how the phrase "science of mind" was used a lot by one of the organization's secretaries and how it made her want to be part of it. Montell also cites how curious he found Instagram to call its users "followers", instead of "friends", as Facebook does, comparing them to a

cult. [9]

A cult that received great attention for its practices and its outcome was the infamous Heaven's Gate, led by Marshall Applewhite, along with Bonnie Nettles, who created a new cult that united religion, mysticism and beliefs in extraterrestrials, which culminated in a mass suicide, shocking the world, as they believed that abandoning their earthly bodies would take them to a new level of existence. After such an act, many cults became more careful, not organizing meetings in person, preferring the virtual medium, bringing more freedom for their ideas to be disseminated.

A great example of these cases is QAnon, which started from a user of an internet discussion forum, and has become a large complex and multifaceted conspiracy theory, which stands out for its ability to mobilize people and influence them, although none of the data presented is based on proven facts. This group demonstrates the danger that lies in the power of cult leaders like this, the power of manipulation along with the power of disinformation, which challenges country borders, borders between reality and fiction, and which have unimaginable consequences for society and democracy.

6. Discussion

The transformation of language is a natural phenomenon, caused by the change of eras in society and the internet plays a very important role in this transformation. With the mediation of algorithms on social networks, the changes have been significant in the way messages are created, spread and interpreted directly impact society in even new ways. Messages are shorter, more direct, and tailored to be consumed more skillfully and visually. Simplifying the process, while making messages more accessible and more shared, reduces the depth of debate and the complexity of ideas. In the future, the tendency is for communication to become even shallower, causing slogans and catchphrases to have more value in relation to in-depth arguments, which leads to a decrease in the quality of public discussions.

Elections make obvious the impact caused by the internet through the way campaigns are conducted. Personalized messages are based on behavioral data, capable of segmenting voters, and the focus has shifted to optimizing engagement and using algorithms in favor of the campaign. From a certain point of life, this allows for more active communication, but on the other hand, it can intensify segregation, while reinforcing social bubbles, in which voters consume only content that confirms their already ingrained beliefs. This, in the long run, can diminish democratic dialogue, while reinforcing social divisions.

According to a statement from META in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1 million pieces of content with misinformation were removed from Facebook and Instagram. In line with the company:

"Our work to combat misinformation also involves partnering with independent fact-checking agencies, for false content that does not violate our policies on harms in the offline world. When a post is marked as false by a partner fact-checking agency, its reach is significantly reduced, meaning fewer people will find that content" (META, 2021) [10]

For society, communication only through digital means brings great challenges, since algorithms tend to prioritize content that brings more engagement, which leads to the promotion of sensationalist or polarized information, harming balanced discourses. This leads to further spread of disinformation and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and contributes to the rise of extremist movements.

In addition, due to the large amount of disinformation present on Twitter/X and its impacts on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and on electoral processes, the Brazilian Justice began to hold him responsible for not fighting it.

Therefore, recently, the platform adopted the "Community Notes", a space in which the information present can be checked and evaluated, with its repercussions reduced. According to the network itself:

"Community Notes aim to create a better informed world by empowering people on X to collaboratively add context to potentially misleading posts." (X, 2024) [11]

Consequently, communication mediated by algorithms causes the dehumanization of social interactions, in which circumstances and contexts are set aside to privilege optimized, fast and simple messages, which generate the unbridled consumption of network mechanisms to maximize clicks and shares. Platforms take advantage of this situation because the more users and the more content is linked, the more money they make with advertising, dissemination and others. While the internet has brought undeniable advances in the way we communicate, the future impacts of this digital revolution need to be carefully evaluated and studied. It is crucial that there is a balance between the efficiency of the algorithms and the depth of the discourse, thus preserving the space for dialogue, debate with verification of the information propagated.

7. Conclusions

Social networks have radically transformed human communication, not only in the transmission of messages, but also in the emergence of new

leadership figures, the "digital leaders", who often resemble cult leaders. These individuals are skilled in human and social language, taking advantage of the speed and scope of digital platforms to manipulate, persuade, and build a fervent and loyal idolatry. They master the mechanisms of networks and understand the weaknesses and fears of the human mind, using this understanding to extend their dominance, creating "big shows" that project their ideas and sophisticated rhetoric to the public, who see them as great leaders.

In this context, the avalanche of information and digital bubbles facilitate the spread of fake news and manipulated messages, which reinforce preexisting beliefs and feed fanaticism.

In this way, communication on social networks, marked by the avalanche of information at all times and by digital bubbles, facilitates the spread of fake news and manipulated messages that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and foster fanaticism. These "digital leaders" often resemble cult leaders, as they are charismatic, and use all means to insert people into their own ideologies and convince them to devotion to them, operating in the digital environment and exploiting the vulnerability of their followers en masse to promote their personal agendas, sell products or even influence electoral processes.

In short, digital platforms have not only impacted human communication as a whole, making it more fragmented and polarized, but have also created an environment conducive to the emergence of digital charlatans, who use persuasion and manipulation as tools to grow their name and increasingly consolidate their power in an increasingly connected and, At the same time, it is increasingly divided, facilitating the creation of fake news and directly impacting the election result, either because the leader is one of the candidates and all his loyal followers will do everything for him to win, or because there is the mass dissemination of disinformation by these groups. This transformation challenges the foundations of democratic dialogue and requires a critical reflection on the role of language in contemporary society.

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