INTEGRITY

TACKLING DISINFORMATION WITH VALUE-BASED RESILIENCE

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Beatrice Giribaldi Groak,
Digitalis, Partner, UK,

Daniel Quirici,
Echo Capital, Founder, UK,
Daniel.quirici@icloud.com

Disinformation is a viral phenomenon, the outcome of an unbalanced value system, causing mental confusion, social fragmentation and political polarization. It cannot be obliterated by counterattacks. However, its impacts can be mitigated by a rebalanced value system allowing:

· **Constructive deliberation on controversial matters (vaccination, climate change, political vote) via conventions, including government, corporate and citizen representatives, agreeing to step-by-step strategies that promote information integrity, and enacting rules sanctioning the accountability of all stakeholders;**

· **Norm perception adjustments, initiated by norm leaders starting at childhood education level; and,**

· **C2C awareness raising on sourcing, discerning and processing knowledge with a view to shaping harmonious social customs**

Global Challenge

Information is knowledge from which opinions are formed. Information based on facts allows proper decision-making and consensus building. However, information that is unverified, deliberately incomplete, or fabricated to intentionally mislead or harm with falsehood, known as disinformation, paralyzes decision-making and results in social disruptions.

Behavioral studies show we all proclaim phantom opinions, taking actions that do not align with those opinions. We also practice rational ignorance, reinforcing our beliefs by deliberately not seeking knowledge, or by selecting only congenial sources (Diamond and Fishkin 2019). Confirmation bias drives our selection of information sources as we seek to validate our beliefs to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). These tendencies leave us vulnerable to fake news tailored to reinforce what we are predisposed to believe.

Neuroscience confirms that our brain's main function is not to seek truth, but rather to ensure comfort and survival (Lotto 2018). Still, our opinions do matter. They morph into beliefs, customs and political power. Our ability to formulate independent opinions, the essence of democracy, depends on reliable knowledge allowing proper reasoning. While disinformation is not new, it is more virulent in digital form. Exponentially increasing numbers of people generate more information variants, continually increasing social dysfunctions. The media's traditional role as a consensus builder has been digitally reversed due to the profitability of stimulating conflict.

Our challenge is therefore to improve:

1. Knowledge assimilation, as disinformation volume and speed accelerate; and,
2. Reasoning capability, as subjects of disagreement proliferate.

Contagion control using the same truth and familiarity inducement techniques used to spread disinformation rarely succeeds in debunking established myths. In our search for truth, we become emotionally attached to our own narratives on how life works. We fight for these stories at any cost, including denying reality. Attempts to correct ingested falsehoods actually reactivate their memory. Fake news therefore sticks because it takes brain effort to unravel a strong narrative and reconstruct a new one. Studies show that the fresh truth veneer flakes and the old narrative eventually resurfaces. For example, to correct the myth that 'Mozart's music will boost your child's IQ,' you might place a "not" in mid-sentence. However, this correction fades away, and the sentence still

recalls the seductive myth of Mozart's influence on children's intelligence (Lewandowsky et al 2020).

Disinformation's continued influence is illustrated in the classic house fire news coverage experiment. The first brief mentions a closet full of oil paint cans. Another cites firefighters' lives at risk with toxic fumes. A corrective brief quotes the police confirming the closet was originally empty. Despite police corrections, up to 90% of subjects bask in a false information afterglow (Dermendzhiyska 2021). Alternative causal logic and verified sources have little knock-on effect on fixed opinions, e.g., about vaccination, climate change or voting (Ecker and Antonio 2020). Combined with norm conformity, peer pressure and tribal attachment, disinformation drives a wedge between facts and feelings and exploits emotional attachment, making the truth inconvenient and the myth or lie convenient. The reptilian mind's desire to maximize emotional comfort and minimize effort wins as the rational mind is overwhelmed (Damasio 2003).

Building immunity to disinformation has strong limitations. For example, in response to subversive disinformation from belligerent neighbors, Estonia and the Czech Republic developed a cyber education defense system to promote digital literacy, think-tanks to produce counter-arguments, and a name-and-shame policy to stigmatize disinformation disseminators. But these tactics did not stop the destabilizing impact of disinformation, nor its continuation (Robbins 2020). The disinformation remained virulent.

Global Solution

In our search for improved knowledge and reasoning, a global solution to disinformation must spring from our collective values, the same values which have created our post-truth era (Davis 2017).

Libertarian economist and Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman, elected among the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, describes a doctrine that has shaped our values over many decades:

> There is one and only one social responsibility of business–to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.

This doctrine has been gospel for the business world. By defining their own rules, corporations have gained power, while social customs allow them to deny responsibility for negative impacts of their blockbuster development, which they consider "externalities." Take for example, the stellar performance of General Electric (GE), financially engineered by CEO Jack Welch, proclaimed the best manager of the twentieth century. This growth ended in a spectacular crash just months after the end of Welch's tenure. Corporate tall tree growth comes at a price as corporations lose sight of the ecosystem that sustains them.

Friedman, in fact, provided the antidote to this destructive process, by noting that the rules of business should be embodied in ethical custom. Why was this antidote to growth hubris ignored? Because the government let corporate rule-takers become rule-makers. They have relinquished their power to set norms, rules and laws, allowing the development of disinformation-driven competition and conflict-ridden social customs.

Symbolically, the word custom shares its etymology with ethics and morals, both defined in terms of values. Customs and values are inseparable in every life form, from cell to organ to society (Damasio 2019). Customs are values in action. However, values must be enacted via proper regulation in order to have a real effect. Values have thus become a political battlefield.

Populists argue, for example, that values of truth, expertise and scientific knowledge should be banned as establishment labels. Yet the real debate is less about individual values per se (Barrett 2006). Rather debates focus on clustering of values around pillars, such as integrity, and on their actual implementation by law. The core systemic issue is that business and consumers have the upper hand over government in setting norms, and share "growth" as an inherent value.

The roots of these customs go back to our childhood values. Praised early for personal growth, we keep calibrating, judging and comparing ourselves against people on our route, and generating anxieties and conflicts. The prodigious power of business is driven by its ability to coax employees and consumers to adopt values that revolve around more. To achieve tall tree status, corporations celebrate growth regardless of externalities: costs to the ecosystem that provides half the supplies used for corporate manufacturing. Corporate values ignore this dependence and its destructive impact (Carney 2021). Despite good intentions behind the corporate world's embrace of ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) principles, growth hubris at the expense of the environment further fuels our endemic disinformation crisis, as illustrated by the practice of greenwashing.

The more norm conformity-building power wielded by business also forces voting citizens to support policies that contradict their personal beliefs, especially if they believe that people like them support these policies. A classic experiment illustrates this. When a test group of US 'liberals' backing a support program for the poor was deliberately misinformed that a majority of Democrats voted against it, the majority actually voted against that program. Such peer group-driven behavior is emotionally consistent, even rational (Damasio 2019), as it nurtures feelings of group belonging and support from 'peers' who influence the community's well-being and identity. Yet, such tribal behavior can jeopardize political plans for perfectly defendable projects such as vaccination, climate change, and social equity (Paluck and Green 2009).

Disinformation is also used to seek supremacy by overtaking competitors, for example through the market launch of improperly tested products (Liautaud 2021). Competing to deliver more fuel-efficient engines, some manufacturers cover up serious vehicle defects and lapses in certification processes, affecting human health and safety. Political illustrations are also rife, for example vaccine disinformation that discredits specific national policies or solutions. These examples illustrate the force of norm influence in prioritizing the value of economic or political power growth over integrity in serving the community.

Since people cherry pick their norms according to their perception of peers' behavior, we can design strategies to change customs by monitoring norm perception processes. A norm-driven custom change strategy is achieved by leveraging the influence of reference peers. This is tested in norm creation experiments on sensitive matters like school harassment or binge drinking. Although officially condemned, these deep-rooted customs are better understood as resulting from norms dictated by salient peers acting as social referents. These virtual clique leaders shape norms privately behind the scenes rather than in public institutional settings. In documented cases, such referents were induced to spread seeds of change regarding the traditional bullying norm and managed to suppress its traumatic disruptions (Paluck and Shepherd 2012). As the most influential narrative disseminators, corporations can help drive such change at a global level.

As the American foreign policy analyst John Arquilla puts it: "In today's global information age, victory often depends not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins." However, we face the paradox of an abundance of stories together with scarcity of attention. Online media platforms compete for our attention by spawning radical content or peppering sensational spins,

reflecting the dominant value of profit growth. While deforming reality to increase click-bait and screen time, they distract us from what we are all searching for: reliable information (Nye 2020). Governments can therefore effectively deal with disinformation by targeting its roots: our post-truth value system based on the false premise of limitless growth, which has transformed us into predators of nature, including human nature, as the citizen's identity is torn between the consumer-employee and the citizen-political agent. We have collectively created a value system feeding on disinformation. Therefore, our values must be reconsidered in a process of carefully organized deliberations between government and corporate leaders under the scrutiny of citizens. Quality information exchange and reasoning are always increased in a structured group context with carefully orchestrated argumentation. Our collective reasoning capabilities can improve only via such deliberations on conflicting views in an organized setting capable of containing the explosive power of emotions (Leslie 2021).

COVID-19 and climate change are both opportunities for governments to level the playing field with corporations. While corporations (and consumers) are dominant norm-setters and rule-makers, current emergencies entitle governments to take back rule-making power. Governments are expected to be ethical pathfinders and to set rules based on new values. Corporations can still play the role they are best at: norm reference agents, spreading values and fostering social customs instigated by younger citizens. New generations seek reliable information to achieve health, wellness and sustainable growth. The role of government is to rule as referee in the clash between these antagonistic forces: the corporate (and consumer) groundswell of limitless growth values vs. citizens' emphasis on sustainable growth values.

Government must be the catalyst facilitating the necessary transformation provoked by this confrontation. Governments have the unique ability to leverage the catalytic capital of

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). The PPP model's efficiency is illustrated by the 'Path to Zero' renewable energy project promoting the decarbonizing of corporate supply chains by 2050.

At a time of cumulative crises, governments have a duty of ethical leadership in leveraging the influence of corporations that have proven skills to drive action by employees of all ethnicities, nationalities and creeds around shared values. Under the aegis of governments, this power of norm adoption can be tapped jointly by political and corporate leaders, in a formal and concerted strategy, to promote information integrity. The EU initiatives of promoting the External Action Service, supporting and funding fact-checkers, and defining a Code of Practice for online platforms to monitor information accuracy, are promising steps. But they will only be truly effective when disinformation disseminators are made accountable under proper law. In the citizens' eyes, governments and corporations, now partners as rule-makers, must also lead by example, acting accordingly as rule-takers.

Policy Recommendations

It is the role of government to maintain social order and protect citizens from the harmful consequences of disinformation. By leveraging integrity-centered values and imposing norms, rules and laws, including sanctions, enacting these values, governments can effectively lead the way. Rather than costly counterattacks on disinformation that have limited effect, it is sensible to appeal to such values as transparency, accountability and completeness of accurate information as positive guidelines.
We therefore propose that governments take the following actions:

· Use the Stanford Centre for Deliberative Democracy model for solving polarization, organize conventions demanding the participation of media firms, citizens and political leaders, aiming at mitigating disinformation by enacting norms and laws

applying to public and private organizations;

· Foster the creation of truth awareness classes in early childhood schools;

· Create a Citizen's Right to Knowledge Charter and promote Knowledge Protection Units in every organization (modeled on the General Data Protection Regulation) to protect all citizens' ability to make informed decisions;

· Promote a Citizen's Watch type disinformation monitoring initiative on the model of Advertising Content Control Agencies, and the Twitter Bird Watch initiative;

· At the G20 level, create a Disinformation Alert Poll and promote a Disinformation Index on the 'UN Human Development Index' / 'Transparency Index' model; and,

· Create a Journalist Publications Verification Authority.

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