

Imaginary and culture of intolerance on algorithmic platforms

JULIO CESAR LEMES DE CASTRO

University of São Paulo (USP) – São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
E-mail: julio@jclcastro.com.br
ORCID: 0000-0002-8961-2104

Volume 40
issue 1 / 2021

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577
Niterói (RJ), 40 (1)
jan/2021-apr/2021

Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication is a quarterly publication of the Graduate Programme in Communication Studies (PPGCOM) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF). It aims to contribute to critical reflection within the field of Media Studies, being a space for dissemination of research and scientific thought.

PPG|COM Programa de Pós-Graduação
COMUNICAÇÃO
MESTRADO E DOUTORADO UFF

TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING CITATION:

Castro, Julio Cesar Lemes de. (2021). At the service of the people? A descriptive study of the community news-casts SE1, JPB1 and RN1. *Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication*, v. 40, n. 1.

Submitted on: 12/23/2020 / Accepted on: 04/20/2021

DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v40i1.47817>



Abstract

In this theoretical articulation based on bibliographic research, the culture of intolerance, driven by the political context of hyperneoliberalism, is linked to the imaginary present on algorithmic platforms, where a fundamental mode of governance is practiced today. While not ignoring past manifestations of intolerance on the Internet, this paper intends to demonstrate how these platforms are environments even more favorable for such manifestations, given the peculiarities of their technology and their business model. To this end, certain aspects of their operation, classified as arena of attention, uneven omnimediation, calibrated exposure and flexible veridiction, are related to dispositions that Lacan associates with the imaginary and aggressiveness – respectively, narcissism, narcissistic identification with leaders, segregation and paranoia.

Keywords

Intolerance; Hate Speech; Imaginary; Algorithms; Platforms.

Introduction

This article assumes that algorithms work as a technology of power with an impact on different spheres of social life. This allows us to speak of an algorithmic governance model (Castro, 2018) as a mode of government of oneself and of others, in line with what Foucault (2004a) calls governmentality. The background of algorithmic governance, intertwined with it, is the neoliberalism that has become hegemonic on a worldwide scale in recent decades (Castro, 2016), taken both as a rationality that permeates the political and economic system and as a kind of subjectivity (Foucault, 2004b).

The best illustration of this type of governance is found in what can be called algorithmic platforms (Castro, 2019). In these devices, under the control of large corporations, the activities and interactions of each user are continuously monitored. Based on the data thus obtained, the contents with the highest chance of attracting the user are selected and ranked. For our purposes, it is worth highlighting the platforms that in some way serve as a scenario for opinion disputes, especially of a political nature, such as Google (including the resources under its umbrella, like YouTube), Facebook and Twitter.

In the aftermath of the financial collapse of 2008 and the austerity measures that followed it, a crisis of legitimation of neoliberalism was triggered. The current period, marked by the intensification of facets inherent to the neoliberal model – exploitation, authoritarianism and political destabilization –, can be qualified as hyperneoliberalism, and inserted in this already troubled scenario is the disruption brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic that erupted in 2020. On platforms, political destabilization appears as disinformation and a culture of intolerance, strongly intertwined.

In another work, dealing specifically with disinformation, I delved into certain aspects of the operation of platforms that result from the articulation between their technology and their business model, classified as arena of attention, uneven omnimediation and calibrated exposure (Castro, 2020d). In this article of theoretical reflection, supported by bibliographic research, these three aspects, to which I add a fourth, flexible veridiction, are linked to the dispositions of users, respectively narcissism, narcissistic identification with leaders, segregation and paranoia, which make platforms especially conducive to the proliferation of the culture of intolerance. Such dispositions correspond, in Lacan's terms, to the imaginary, which unfolds in a dimension of aggressiveness and tends to be inflated on platforms.

Erosion of authority and the imaginary

In the early days of his intellectual trajectory, in the 1930s, Lacan's (2001) most important publication is his piece on family complexes, originally written for the *Encyclopédie Française*. Starting from Durkheim's (1975) analysis of the transition from the pre-modern extended family to the conjugal family of modernity, Lacan attributes a major change to the family's contraction: if the roles of model and repression were heretofore performed by different people, they are now played solely by the father. He becomes both the "father who says yes" and the "father who says no," roles internalized, respectively, by the instances that Freud calls "ego ideal" and "superego." This duality, which upsets the exercise of the law embodied in the paternal authority, opening a breach that allows it to be questioned, is the source of both the neurosis and the creativity that define modern individuality.

Inscribed here are Lacan's reflections about the imaginary, which, articulated around the ego, constitutes one of the registers of human experience, alongside the symbolic and the real. The advance of individuality in modernity corresponds to the advance of the imaginary, underlined in several passages. For Lacan (1966a, p. 97), the fantasy of the divided body that precedes the formation of the ego is fixed by Bosch "in its rise in the 15th century to the imaginary zenith of modern man." At another point, he notes that the pre-Freudian conception of the ego "begins at a time that we can locate towards the middle of the 16th or beginning of the 17th centuries" (Lacan, 1978, pp. 15-16). He further states that Pascal's *Thoughts*

were written at “the dawn of the historical era of the ego” (Lacan, 1966c, p. 283), which would therefore be around 1670.

In Freud (1967b, p. 257), the ego has a social reach, being constituted through identification with external figures and thus appearing as “a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes, which contains the history of these object choices.” For Lacan, these are imaginary identifications, first with the specular image and then with similar people, bounded by symbolic identifications, with people in a position of authority. In the text on family complexes, however, Lacan (2001) points out that, due to the erosion of paternal authority in modernity, the father struggles to incarnate the law. This fragility of paternal authority certainly affects the ego and is closely linked to Lacan’s reflections on the imaginary, which also began at that time and resonate with the historical conjuncture of the rise of fascism.

In these reflections, what stands out are the ego’s vulnerabilities and how to remedy them. As a product of external identifications, the ego is inherently alienated. Reacting to the perception of its own alienation, it tends to turn inward, keeping alterity and difference at bay. This translates into a rigid and static narcissistic structure: the ego is comparable to a “statue” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 95), an “armor” (ibid., p. 97) or a “fortified field” (ibid., p. 97). The defensive posture unfolds in “aggressiveness as a tension related to the narcissistic structure” (Lacan, 1966b, p. 120). However, there are other defense strategies that amount to a kind of colonization of the outside world by the ego. This is the case of narcissistic identification with figures somewhat similar to the ego that occupy prominent positions. These figures operate as extensions through which the ego acquires a vicarious sense of power, and additionally as a transmission belt for aggressiveness. Alternatively, narcissistic identification with peers forms homogeneous groups. These groups are founded upon segregation, since they presuppose the exclusion of those that are different, who they turn into targets of aggression. Another type of expansion of the ego is projection, a mechanism typical of paranoia, when certain internal impulses are transferred externally and viewed hostilely as threats. That is, in order to defend itself against its vulnerabilities, the ego closes itself to the outside world or tries to mold it to its own image; in one way or another, the aggressive dimension of the imaginary is evident.

The control of users on platforms is ultimately wielded by the corporations to which the platforms belong, although this control is based on the agency of the users themselves – a control via agency (Castro, 2020c). This means that users are invariably interpellated by the platform based on their past activity, but have a relative latitude to act, which in turn leads to the continuous recalibration of the interpellation. Thus, the existing authority on platforms, considered in terms of both model and repression, is flexible. There are opportunities for action, or affordances (Gibson, 2015), which circumscribe the use of platforms (for example, the Twitter character limit), but there is no standard for what should be posted. Of course, there are restrictions on certain content (for example, images of nudity on Facebook), but only on occasional instances. Unlike a newspaper with a particular editorial line, in principle it is not in the interest of platforms to influence the user’s political opinions, but simply to encourage his participation. Concomitantly with this relativization of authority, there is an inflation of the imaginary, with implications in terms of aggressiveness. Let us look at the various ways in which this occurs.

Arena of attention and narcissism

Upon introducing the concept of “public sphere” in the early 1960s, Habermas (1990) warns us, in the very title of his work, that this is a “category of bourgeois society” subject to a “structural change.” This change, he believes, consists of a progressive deflation, starting in the late 19th century. According to Sennett (2002, p. 282-283), the tendency to empty the public sphere in favor of the private realm, which colonizes it, is reinforced by electronic means in general and goes hand in hand with narcissism. Baudrillard (1988, p. 227-228) states that, with the new technologies, we watch Narcissus’ triumph over

Oedipus – which, in psychoanalytic terms, would be equivalent to an expansion of the imaginary at the expense of the symbolic. An evolution in this direction can be tracked on the Internet.

The communication devices available in the early days of the Internet – electronic mail, mailing lists, newsgroups, chats – did not select or rank contents. Therefore, if a user chose to use a particular device, everything that other participants posted was presented to him in the sequence in which it was posted. In this context, there were harmless ways to get attention. The user could stand out, for example, by voluntarily providing information and assistance to other participants – the so-called “gift economy.” However, in the permissive environment of cyberspace, attention could be attracted aggressively by violating the rules of coexistence, e.g., by trolling, flaming, ranting, flooding or by using fictitious identities, which flourish at that moment.

The search for attention also involves practical issues. In the early days of the Internet, when advertising was not yet deemed acceptable, spam loomed like a stealthy device to attract interest for commercial purposes. With the emergence of the Web and the rapid multiplication of its addresses, search engines that crawl the Web and the ordering of the results they display gain importance, although in the first mechanisms of this nature, such as Altavista, this process is relatively rudimentary. Be that as it may, to get their sites to stand out, those responsible for them resort to various tricks that are not always entirely honest.

The effort to refine searches, coupled with commercial exploitation, is at the root of the development of user management via algorithms by Google, which consolidates the standard of algorithmic platform and economy of attention. Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page (1998), who founded Google while doing a doctorate at Stanford, drew inspiration from the notion of the impact factor in the academic field. The ranking of a page depends on the number and quality of the links to it, and the quality of each link varies in turn with the number and quality of the links to it, and so on. The ranking also takes into account the popularity of the page, that is, how many users click on it when it appears between the results. In addition, the results for each user are customized considering his previous queries and what most interested him. The customized results are combined with customized ads, which are intermixed with them.

On other platforms whose business model is based on advertising (such as Facebook), e-commerce (such as Amazon) or the sale of services (such as Netflix and Spotify), we are faced with an analogous type of customization of content and advertisements or offers. What each user sees is selected and hierarchized by algorithms, in consonance with his past choices. Ultimately, this management via algorithms is due to monetary reasons: what is customized is what is intended for sale directly to the user, or what is intended to be of interest to him in order to engage him to generate profiles that help to sell him something or simply keep him as a customer. In one way or another, the continuous procedures of selection and hierarchization are subordinate to the search for his attention. It is this search that is valued by platforms.

Therefore, we can state that the platforms crown a trajectory of progressive development of the media and the Internet. Simultaneously, they also cap a long process of deflation of the public sphere. In good measure, this gives rise to what we could call an arena of attention, with the meanings of place of spectacle and place of dispute coexisting in “arena.” Instead of the rational debate in search of agreement that ideally characterizes the public sphere, corresponding to a symbolic interaction in Lacanian terms, we have a struggle at any cost for attention, combining visibility and aggressiveness, which are typical ingredients of the imaginary. More specifically, what is evident here is the exploitation of users’ narcissism.

“The narcissistic or ego libido appears to us as the great reservoir from which object cathexes are sent out, and into which they are drawn back again,” states Freud (1968, p. 119). In other words, libido can move from the ego to external objects or from these back to the ego. There are pathological cases in which the libido is concentrated in the ego, but in principle it oscillates between the ego and the objects, in keeping with different situations in each one’s life. We can, however, think of certain contexts that favor

a narcissistic investment of the libido more centered on the ego, as is the case of platforms as an arena of attention.

In practice, making others' attention converge upon oneself is equivalent to investing in oneself. If the commercial appeals that circulate on platforms are subject to the economy of attention, this applies equally to content produced by users in order to reach others. To succeed in this endeavor, the user has to know what works, to follow certain success formulas. Moreover, even if someone is not so interested in gaining popularity, the platform environment itself induces this behavior. The generalization of measurement leaves this sequel: exposing the count of reactions, comments and shares on Facebook, retweets and responses on Twitter, or views and comments on YouTube, stimulates each user to compete with others (by comparing his metrics with theirs) and with himself (by comparing the numbers of his different posts).

In the dispute for attention, intolerance can be an asset. The fact that algorithms favor intolerance – as well as the disinformation that accompanies it – by bolstering this dispute is identified in empirical studies. A survey of fake news from the launch of Twitter in 2006 up to 2017 not only certifies that rumors spread more quickly and to a larger number of people than real news, but concatenates their spread to the mobilization of feelings such as disgust, fear, anger and sadness (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Another empirical study that focuses on the Chinese social network Weibo, homologous to Twitter, which includes 70 million posts by 278,654 users, attests to the fact that the influence of anger is far greater than that of other feelings, such as joy (Fan, Zhao, Chen, & Xu, 2014). A survey on Gab (Mathew, Dutt, Goyal, & Mukherjee, 2019), a platform that extols its commitment to freedom of expression and is known for attracting far-right supporters, concludes that the spread of hate speech is faster, broader and deeper than other content. In a poll by the Pew Research Center (Smith, 2018), 71% of social media users report reacting angrily to given content, and 25% reveal that this happens frequently. Another analysis by the same organization (Kessel, Hughes, & Messing, 2018), focusing on posts by members of the United States Congress on Facebook, finds that the most common reaction to such posts is anger.

Traditional forms of intolerance, the manifestations of prejudice – such as racism, misogyny and homophobia –, commonly linked to reactionary political views, can be potentiated by the dispute for attention on platforms, as they instigate supporters on the one hand, and arouse shock and indignation on the other. They polarize mainly with the radicalized defense of progressive positions on the part of those treated pejoratively as “social justice warriors” (SJW). We then see the deepening of what Hunter (1991) calls “cultural wars,” originally about the cleavage between conservatives and progressives in the United States on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, drug use and carrying weapons. An emblematic episode is Gamergate, which opposes the sexist culture of online games to feminist attitudes and is triggered by harassment – including accounts hacking, doxing (disclosure of private data) and threats of rape and death – of the game developer Zoë Quinn (2017).

Uneven omnimediation and narcissistic identification with leaders

The mediation function appears in Lewin (1943) as gatekeeping, and is compared to that of a doorman who determines what enters or is barred from a channel. The idea of gatekeeping is extended by White (1950) to journalism, which is responsible for determining what is newsworthy content and how it reaches the audience. The contribution of Lazarsfeld and colleagues (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) is to show another type of mediation: for them, the mass media does not directly influence the public in a one-step flow but through opinion leaders in a two-step flow.

On algorithmic platforms, journalists and traditional opinion leaders also play a mediating role. However, they are not the only ones: with engagement and skill, others also stand out in this role. Thus, there is a generalization of mediation. Some are “super-influencers” (Wei & Meng, 2021), eliciting

broad repercussions in their posts due to their prestige and large number of followers. Others, who are noteworthy for their intense activity, are “superparticipants” (Graham & Wright, 2014). However, in the end, all users are in fact mediators to some extent, acting as both participants and influencers. Any user intervention, even by means of a simple like or retweet, is taken into account by algorithms and influences the way others are interpellated. To the extent that everyone is a mediator to a certain degree, we can speak of uneven omnimediation.

Here it is worth recalling Freud’s (1967a) lessons on mass psychology. According to Freud’s analysis, the mass operates via identification with the leader. In other words, each member of the mass puts the figure of the leader, which represents the internalization of authority as a model, in place of his ego ideal. While pre-Freudian mass psychology postulates a mysterious force linking one individual to another – contagion in Le Bon (2010) and imitation in Tarde (1910) –, for Freud it is the existence of a common leader that gives cohesion to the mass. On the platforms, one can see a variation *vis-à-vis* Freudian mass psychology. There, the mass is no longer exactly a mass but assumes the shape of a network, in which the central leader gives way to the multiplication of leaders. Uneven omnimediation therefore corresponds to a fragmentation of the leader’s role.

In Freud, each member of the mass as such, by abdicating at least temporarily an internalized instance of authority in favor of an external figure, tends to act irrationally. This mechanism explains why perfectly civilized people, when gathered in a mass, often adopt truculent attitudes. In the fragmented masses of platforms, this phenomenon takes the form of aggressive herd behavior. This also contributes to the nature of identification that is established with someone in a leadership position: platforms favor identifications of a narcissistic type, encompassing the two meanings of the leader, which in Freud can be concrete (a person) or abstract (an idea).

If the generalization of mediation on platforms enables each user to play a mediating role, however small, the task of expanding this role is further facilitated. Often ordinary people, amateurs without special qualifications and relying only on less tangible attributes such as communication talents and charisma, end up emerging as leaders. In addition, the very nature of virtual interaction contributes to a sense of closeness to the leader, who tends to express himself in a colloquial manner and with whom it is possible to communicate directly. All of this ends up privileging narcissistic identifications, in which the leader appears as “the enlargement of the subject’s own personality, a collective projection of himself” (Adorno, 1972, p. 418). This type of identification is made possible even by the weaknesses perceived in the leader, which contribute to portray him as an ordinary person, including in the case of tyrants: “Hitler can gesticulate like a clown; Mussolini can strike false notes like a provincial tenor” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1981, p. 209). However, a primary characteristic often present in this kind of leadership and that distinguishes it from the common man is the disinhibition in externalizing what the latter would be ashamed to utter (Adorno, 1972, p. 427). This disinhibition allows him to give free rein to aggression, thus promoting a culture of intolerance. This applies to the promotion of the so-called “alt-right” on YouTube by influencers who cultivate an image of authenticity and radicalism (Lewis, 2018).

One should also consider the intensive use of fake accounts and robots on platforms, with multiple purposes (there are even virtual influencers – artificial creations that simulate real humans – in the service of marketing), but always trying to enhance the effect of algorithms. In a famous 1950 text, Turing (2004) proposes a test to see if an intelligent machine could pass for a human being. In practice, without having to face a test of this kind, many robots operating on platforms are not discerned as such by most participants. This allows the outsourcing to them of tasks traditionally performed by uninhibited leaders. Fake accounts and robots are often used primarily to foster the spread of hate speech, as occurs during the Covid-19 pandemic (Uyheng & Carley, 2020).

In contentious phenomena on platforms, ideas in the leadership position are typically memes, libidinal condensations of words and images that consist of the contemporary version of the jokes analyzed

by Freud (1940). In other words, manifestations of intolerance on platforms are often formally embedded in the aesthetics of the meme, which contributes to narcissistic identifications by providing proximity to the public and creating complicity with it. Typified by irreverent, anarchic humor, the aesthetic of the meme gives to manifestations of intolerance a pop aura and a peculiar appeal to young people. Memes can be used, for example, to convey negative stereotypes (Duchscherer & Dovidio, 2016). Thus, the far right uses memes to portray feminism as the “monstrous feminine” (Massanari & Chess, 2018).

The use of this aesthetic is common among political leaders linked to the discourse of intolerance, such as Trump and Bolsonaro. These leaders, as well as secondary leaders who align themselves with them and reproduce something of their style, even appear themselves as memes, that is, as ludicrous figures that are difficult to take seriously because of their erratic behavior. This humanizes their image, making them resemble ordinary citizens, and concomitantly reifies them, equaling them to things and leading their actions to be evaluated to some degree as inconsequential, like cartoon characters that at one moment are squashed, stretched, twisted, burned, and immediately afterward parade around vivaciously, their bodies intact. These leaders sense this, feeding the memes: Trump retweets an effigy of himself as Pepe the Frog and Bolsonaro verbally compares himself to Johnny Bravo. Reification through the meme, therefore, ends up providing a kind of safe conduct for the heralds of intolerance.

Calibrated exposure and segregation

Given that algorithmic platforms seek to offer to each user what most attracts him, a well-known consequence of this is the grouping of users with similar interests and opinions, generating the so-called “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2007) or “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011). However, considering that these groupings are not completely homogeneous, i.e., it is not possible to completely avoid exposure to different positions (Bruno, 2019), it would be more appropriate to talk about calibrated exposure. In other words, what is shown to the user is weighted according to his preferences, albeit without being uniform.

On platforms, there are numerous examples of traditional outbreaks of intolerance on the Internet, both individual and isolated. Nevertheless, the algorithms tend to potentiate mainly those that have a collective horizon, due to the approximation between users with similar positions via calibrated exposure. When someone expresses himself individually in interactions with his contacts, he is often reverberating far-reaching positions. In addition, manifestations of intolerance driven by algorithms are recurrent. By privileging situations that lead to engagement, regardless of their content, algorithms also favor litigation, which escalates quickly. Even traditional trolling, claims Phillips (2015), becomes in the 2000s an identity assumed by its own practitioners, not simply a label applied to them by others, and emerges as a subculture. Developing in marginal forums like 4chan, this subculture, which boasts of its politically incorrect nature, intertwines with the alternative right (Nagle, 2017).

Notable episodes of intolerance are online firestorms, collective explosions of outrage against a person, a group or an organization. Note that here non-anonymity does not necessarily function as an inhibiting agent, and may be associated with greater aggressiveness than anonymity (Rost, Stahel, & Frey, 2016). This is not complicated to understand, especially when what is at stake is not an isolated aggression against someone, but something linked to a broader political cause. In these cases, the explicit assumption of aggression by someone in his own name gives more effectiveness to his manifestations, allows him to demonstrate that he is on the side that he deems correct in some matter, facilitates his identification as a member of a certain current, and enables him to obtain recognition for his attitudes. Intolerance also appears through political polarization, which is usually based on disinformation, finding fertile ground on platforms. It draws one’s attention the quasi-exclusiveness of the destructive agenda in the case of the far-right populism that has thrived in recent years, appearing on platforms mainly as coordinated movements that operate as hybrid war machines, like the election campaigns of Trump in 2016 (Castro, 2020a) and of

Bolsonaro in 2018 (Castro, 2020b).

These collective and recurring phenomena contain a dynamic of segregation, upon which psychoanalysis helps to shed light. In an intervention in Strasbourg in 1968, Lacan (1969) declares, “I believe that in our time the trait, the scar left by the evaporation of the father is what we could place under the rubric and the general title of segregation.” What he regards as evaporation is a change in the exercise of the paternal function, and by extension, of authority and law (which in psychoanalysis, since Freud, are synthesized by the father), due to transformations in the symbolic order, represented in Lacan by the Other, in uppercase (to differentiate from the other in lowercase, which represents the imaginary). We can say that these transformations today take the form of the algorithmic Other. Algorithm has the generic meaning of recipe, of a set of steps to do something; the algorithmic Other represents the customization of the law in norms, as occurs on platforms.

Aiming at the destruction of otherness, hatred is camouflaged behind pretexts resulting from Western morality (Lacan, 1975, p. 305-306), but on platforms flexibly regulated by algorithms, the weight of that morality declines and hatred can break out into the open, especially if we consider that the user has no face-to-face contact with others and can act in tandem with some. Hate is central to creating a social bond in a context of fragmentation linked to generalized segregation. Disparate groups are able to align themselves around hatred of a common target, although they do not share much more than that. In his mass psychology, Freud recognizes the unifying nature of hatred alongside that of love, the ability that hatred of a common target has to impart cohesion to a group. Among the Nazis, anti-Semitism effectively carried out this task. In our time, there is also a prevalence of the bond of hate over the bond of love. Lacan (1991, p. 132) is incisive in this regard: “I only know one source of fraternity – I speak of the human, always the humus –, it is segregation.”

In psychoanalytic terms, platforms track user preferences, capturing their favorite ways of enjoying, and group these users according to affinity in terms of enjoyment, leading the typical procedures of the consumer society to the ultimate consequences. As a scar arising from the evaporation of authority, the algorithmic Other therefore involves segregation anchored in enjoyment, which is at the base of hatred, since this affect typically targets the other’s particular mode of enjoyment (for example, in the case of foreigners, their food, their odors, their music, their dance, their sexuality). In contrast to the symbolic, enjoyment is not subject to universalization; there is something excessive, intolerable about enjoyment that differs from ours. And hatred of the other’s enjoyment secretes an enjoyment that complements it, the enjoyment of this hatred itself, the satisfaction linked to the other’s failures, tribulations and sufferings, designated in German as “*Schadenfreude*.” The platform-specific version of this enjoyment is “lulz,” a word derived from the corruption of “LOL” (“Laugh Out Loud”), the enjoyment obtained at the expense of trolling victims.

Flexible verification and paranoia

Given that algorithms are subordinate to market purposes, it is natural that they work on algorithmic platforms as an “instance of veridiction,” that is, of establishing the truth, the role associated by Foucault (2004b, p. 35) to the market under neoliberalism. The decisive criterion of the algorithms for selecting and ranking content is circulation: what is most valued is what generates greater engagement, gauged by metrics such as views, likes, comments and shares. As the exchange value of content predominates over its use value, we enter what can be called “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2009). In it, truth is in practice defined as the most successful.

This scenario, of course, favors disinformation in general. But there is a type of disinformation that often blends with the culture of intolerance and which is worth mentioning: conspiracy theories. Such theories postulate the coordinated action of powerful forces, which hide their own activities or other facts

from the public, and present this action in an exaggerated and often even apocalyptic way. Furthermore, these theories tend to push Manichaeism to the limit, absolutizing the evil practiced by the conspirators and the good represented by those who denounce them. To be maintained, disinformation often requires the use of conspiracy theories. For instance, in order to support the belief that the Earth is flat, despite the plethora of evidence to the contrary, it is necessary to suppose that there is a major conspiracy in this regard, involving governments, science and the media. Moreover, belief in conspiracy theories, in turn, requires continuous stacking of evidence, despite its dubious rigor. Such evidence is constantly sought, or even produced, by the followers themselves. In the case of flatearthism, YouTube, in particular, is a very convenient environment for this, offering its followers the possibility of articulating and boosting their theses (Mohammed, 2019).

A typical conspiracy theory that has gained traction in recent years, mainly in the United States, but with reverberations in other countries, is QAnon. It proclaims the existence of an international network dedicated to child trafficking and pedophilia, which brings together central figures in the American Democratic Party such as Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and their supporters, including established Hollywood artists such as Tom Hanks, having also ramifications in the so-called “deep state” (which refers to security forces and intelligence agencies acting in spite of civil power) and the global elite. This network, so the theory goes, has its nemesis in Trump, and this would provide an explanatory key to many of the political clashes surrounding his presidency. It is a construction in the service of Trumpism, which originates from Pizzagate, a conspiracy theory propagated through the social networks during the 2016 elections, about Hillary Clinton’s link with a circle of pedophiles based in a restaurant in Washington. QAnon appears in October 2017 from the posts of an alleged federal agent under the pseudonym of Q (letter indicating a privileged credential for access to confidential information), initially in 4chan, then in its similar 8chan and 8kun, spreading later to mainstream platforms.

Conspiracy theories involving threats to children, it should be noted, have always existed. Nevertheless, the motivations behind them and their targets adapt to the circumstances, something that has become visible in recent decades. Confronting moral panic in the face of dangers that surround childhood with the lack of evidence of an actual increase in these dangers, Fine and Mechling (1991) conjecture that such perception of risk would be related to the most valuable status of children in a context in which families are smaller and the cost of raising each child increases. This fits the neoliberal vision of a “human capital” (Becker, 1993) embedded in each individual, which depends on investments in education, health, etc. At the same time, women’s greater professional engagement, accompanied inevitably by outsourced childcare, gives rise to a conservative anti-feminist backlash that takes the form of fears about children’s safety and well-being (Beck, 2015). This reaction tends to align with the so-called “reactionary neoliberalism,” which is opposed to “progressive neoliberalism,” a dispute that takes place not in the economic field but in the moral one (Fraser, 2019). Evoking the scarecrow of pedophilia and targeting liberal sectors in terms of mores, QAnon is nourished by the cultural wars running through American society and exacerbated under the Trump administration, especially in pandemic times. In addition, the expressed concern for children gives QAnon an important way of accessing the mainstream, allowing it to gain supporters among influential mothers and groups of mothers on various platforms (Dickson, 2020; Butler, 2020). It is worth noting that in Brazil’s 2018 presidential election, some of the most influential fake news spread by Bolsonaro supporters, such as the gay kit and the baby bottle with a penis nipple, also appeal to the moral panic of threats to childhood.

Conspiracy theories refer to the paranoid nature of human knowledge, according to Lacan. For him, the baby initially does not perceive himself as a unit, but as a broken body, a set of pieces without coordination. It is between six and eighteen months of age, when he begins to recognize the image he sees in the mirror as his own image, that his ego is constituted. The advent of the ego presupposes, therefore, a double illusion: that of an external image taken as interiority and that of an external completeness in place

of internal incoordination. At the same time, the contrast between his imperfection and the perfection of the image leads the baby to a rivalry with the latter. The confusion between the ego and the external image also appears in the phenomenon of transitivity: a baby cries when he sees another baby fall, because he still cannot distinguish himself from the other. Over time, obviously, the demarcation between the ego and the outside becomes clearer, but as the ego continues to identify itself imaginarily with others and to constitute itself through these identifications, an element of illusion and rivalry persists in its relationship with the world. This confused relationship with the outside is captured by the term “paranoia,” which in the original Greek (παράνοια) is composed of “para” (outside) and “nous” (mind), indicating a certain permeability between our mind and what is outside of it. In particular, paranoia is characterized by the mechanism of projection, that is, the tendency to attribute to the world something that is in ourselves – which is exactly the distinctive mechanism of conspiracy theories.

It is important to point out that if conspiracy theories are constructions of a paranoid type, they are not necessarily a matter of paranoia in the clinical sense, but of paranoid traits present in everyone, which involve the imaginary. These traits can gain strength due to opportune social conditions and individual predispositions. The current historical circumstances of hyperneoliberalism represent fertile ground for conspiracy theories. Additionally, the context of the platforms seems to be tailored to these theories. As we have already seen, they lead to an inflation of the imaginary in different ways, but it is worth highlighting their projective character here. Algorithms enable the user to create a world in his own image and likeness, choosing his contacts, the content he wants to see and ultimately what the truth is for him. It is certain that psychoanalysis itself, for Freud, claims that the analyst projects onto the analyst affects that involve other people. In this case, however, ponders Lacan (1966b, p. 109), it is a “paranoid mechanism [...] well-systematized, filtered somehow and stanced in a custom-made way.” On the platforms, on the other hand, it can even be stated that there is a systematic and filtered projection, but it is inflated to the extreme.

Final remarks

It is undeniable that intolerance has always existed socially and has always been present on the Internet, as witnessed by the literature on the subject.

In any case, it should be noted that neoliberalism, the hegemonic regime of capitalism since the 1980s, has recently undergone an inflection that accentuates some of its facets. This inflection, qualified here as hyperneoliberalism, goes hand in hand with the exacerbation of intolerance.

Furthermore, as has been pointed out, the algorithmic platforms that emerge in the neoliberal context and reflect their governance model are an extremely favorable terrain for intolerance due to their technology and their business model, contributing significantly to this aggravation.

That being said, we are facing a conjunction of several factors that appear in the various aspects of the operation of the platforms discussed in this article as favorable to intolerance, namely arena of attention, uneven omnimediation, calibrated exposure and flexible veridiction.

However, to elucidate the concrete resonance of all this in each user, it is essential to take into account the psychic elements involved, and to this end, the use of the Lacanian concept of the imaginary as the guiding thread is crucial.

References

Adorno, T. W. (1972). Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda. In T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 8: Soziologische Schriften I* (pp. 408-433). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Baudrillard, J. (1988). *De la séduction*. Paris: Denoël.

- Beck, R. (2015). *We believe the children: A moral panic in the 1980s*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. 3rd ed. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Brin, S., & Page, L. (1998). The anatomy of a large-scale hypertextual Web search engine. Retrieved from <http://infolab.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html>.
- Bruns, A. (2019). *Are filter bubbles real?* Cambridge (UK) and Medford: Polity Press.
- Butler, K. (2020, Sep 23). The terrifying story of how QAnon infiltrated moms' groups. *Mother Jones*.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2016). Social networks as dispositives of neoliberal governmentality. *Journal of Media Critiques*, 2(7), 85-102.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2018, maio/agosto). Social networks as a model of algorithmic governance. *Matrizes*, 12(2), 165-191.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2019, setembro/dezembro). Plataformas algorítmicas: interpelação, perfilamento e performatividade. *Revista Famecos*, 26(3), 1-24.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2020a). Máquinas de guerra híbrida em plataformas algorítmicas. *E-Compós*, 23, 1-29.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2020b, janeiro-abril). Neoliberalismo, guerra híbrida e a campanha presidencial de 2018. *Comunicação & Sociedade*, 42(1), 261-291.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2020c, maio/agosto). Controle via agência em plataformas algorítmicas. *Galáxia*, São Paulo, 44, 144-157.
- Castro, J. C. L. (2020d). A economia da desinformação em plataformas algorítmicas. *Anais do XLIII Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências da Comunicação*, Universidade Federal da Bahia.
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Dickson, E. J. (2020, Sep 2). The birth of QAmom. *Rolling Stone*.
- Duchscherer, K. M., & Dovidio, J. F. (2016). When memes are mean: appraisals of and objections to stereotypic memes. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 2(3), 335-345.
- Durkheim, É. (1975). *Textes 3: Fonctions sociales et institutions*. Paris: Minuit.
- Fan, R., Zhao, J., Chen, Y., & Xu, K. (2014, Oct). Anger is more influential than joy: sentiment correlation in Weibo. *PLOS ONE*, 9(10).
- Fine, G. A., & Mechling, J. (1991). Minor difficulties: changing children in the late twentieth century. In Alan Wolfe (Ed.), *America at century's end* (pp. 58-78). Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (2004a). *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*. Paris: Gallimard/Seuil.
- Foucault, M. (2004b). *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Paris: Gallimard/Seuil.
- Fraser, N. (2019). *The old is dying and the new cannot be born: From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond*. London and New York: Verso.
- Freud, S. (1940). *Gesammelte Werke, sechster Band: Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*.

London: Imago.

Freud, S. (1967a). Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse. In Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke, dreizehnter Band: Jenseits des Lustprinzips / Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse / Das Ich und das Es* (pp. 71-161). 5. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.

Freud, S. (1967b). Das Ich und das Es. In Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke, dreizehnter Band: Jenseits des Lustprinzips / Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse / Das Ich und das Es* (pp. 235-289). 5. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.

Freud, S. (1968). Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie. In Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke, fünfter Band: Werke aus den Jahren 1904-1905* (pp. 27-145). 4. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.

Gibson, J. J. (2015). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. New York and London: Psychology Press.

Graham, T., & Wright, S. (2014, Apr). Discursive equality and everyday talk online: the impact of "superparticipants." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(3), 625-642.

Habermas, J. (1990). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Neuaufl. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (1981). Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente. In T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 3*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*. New York: Basic Books.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence*. New York: Free Press.

Kessel, P., Hughes, A., & Messing, S. (2018, Jul 18). Taking sides on Facebook: how congressional outreach changed under President Trump. *Pew Research Center*.

Lacan, J. (1966a). Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je. In Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (pp. 93-100). Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1966b). L'agressivité en psychanalyse. In Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (pp. 101-124). Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1966c). Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse. In Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (pp. 237-322). Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1969). Intervention sur l'exposé de M. de Certeau "Ce que Freud fait de l'histoire. Note à propos de 'Une névrose démoniaque au XVIIIe siècle,'" Congrès de Strasbourg, le 12 octobre 1968. *Lettres de L'École Freudienne*, 7, 84.

Lacan, J. (1975). *Le séminaire, livre I: Les écrits techniques de Freud*. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1978). *Le séminaire, livre II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1991). *Le séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (2001). Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu. In Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits* (pp. 23-84). Paris: Seuil.

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Le Bon, G. (2010). *Psychologie des foules*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Lewin, K. (1943, Oct). Forces behind food habits and methods of change. *Bulletin of the National Research*

Council, 108, p. 35-65.

Lewis, R. (2018). *Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube*. New York: Data & Society Research Institute.

Massanari, A. L., & Chess, S. (2018). Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: the discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 525-542.

Mathew, B., Dutt, R., Goyal, P., & Mukherjee, A. (2019). Spread of hate speech in online social media. *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Web Science*, Northeastern University.

Mohammed, S. N. (2019, Fall). Conspiracy theories and flat Earth videos on YouTube. *Journal of Social Media in Society*, 8(2), 84-102.

Nagle, A. (2017). *Kill all normies: The online culture wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump*. Winchester and Washington: Zero Books.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. New York: Penguin Press.

Phillips, W. (2015). *This is why we can't have nice things: Mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture*. Cambridge (MA) and London: MIT Press.

Quinn, Z. (2017). *Crash override: How Gamergate (nearly) destroyed my life, and how we can win the fight against online hate*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Rost, K., Stahel, L., & Frey, B. S. (2016). Digital social norm enforcement: online firestorms in social media. *PLOS ONE*, 11(6).

Sennett, R. (2002). *The fall of public man*. London: Penguin.

Smith, A. (2018, Nov 16). Public attitudes toward computer algorithms. *Pew Research Center*.

Sunstein, C. R. (2007). *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Tarde, G. (1910). *L'opinion et la foule*. 3ème ed. Paris: Félix Alcan.

Turing, A. M. (2004). Computing machinery and intelligence. In A. M. Turing, *The essential Turing: Seminal writings in computing, logic, philosophy, artificial intelligence, and artificial life, plus the secrets of Enigma* (pp. 433-464). Oxford: Clarendon.

Uyheng, J., & Carley, K. M. (2020, Nov). Bots and online hate during the COVID-19 pandemic: case studies in the United States and the Philippines. *Journal of Computational Social Science*, 3(2), 445-468.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018, Mar 9). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), p. 1146-1151.

Wei, J., & Meng, F. (2021, Feb). How opinion distortion appears in super-influencer dominated social network. *Future Generation Computer Systems*, 115, p. 542-552.

White, D. M. (1950). The "gate keeper": a case study in the selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly*, 27(4), 383-390..

Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro is a senior researcher at the Laboratory of Social Theory, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis of the University of São Paulo. He holds a PhD in Communication and Semiotics from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and is a former postdoctoral researcher at University of São Paulo, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and University of Sorocaba.