

The effectiveness of political leadership during the information revolution predicted by Peter Drucker

I. Looking to the past

May 29, 1780.

The British commander Lt. Colonel Banastre Tarleton demands Abraham Buford, Colonel of the Continental Army, to surrender. He refuses it; the battle begins and his soldiers surrender after being overpowered. During the truce, Tarleton's horse is shot and he gets trapped underneath it. His troops think he was murdered and attack the surrendered soldiers in revenge. It results in the death of over 100 American patriots.

This is one version of the battle known as the Waxhaw Massacre of the American Revolutionary War. The other one, adopted by Americans, says Tarleton purposely ignored the surrender and ordered the massacre. This version became propaganda. It was used to convince the south population to take a side in the war, faced with the supposed brutality of the British army.

History has been told like this for centuries, but modern studies about the battle¹ have questioned the veracity of facts. They also exposed the first version told by Tarleton himself² and confirmed by soldiers from both sides.

And today, 240 years later, information and how it's manipulated still plays the same role in shaping society's opinion.

II. Information filter

Information underwent several revolutions throughout history, like the writing creation and the Gutenberg press. Peter Drucker predicted in 1998 that the next one would be about its meaning and purpose, and it would also involve the major society's institutions. He suggested an effective system to be developed in the following decade, based on collecting and organizing information external to corporations³. This revolution presents itself today as Big Data. It's a knowledge area that collects and analyzes the immense data flow generated by society in the digital medium (system

¹ Jim Piecuch, *The Blood Be Upon Your Head: Tarleton and the Myth of Buford's Massacre* (Lugoff: Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution Press, 2010), 27-40.

² Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 In the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 31-32.

³ Peter F. Drucker, "The Next Information Revolution", *Forbes*, August 24, 1998, <http://www.sjtech.com/Peter%20Drucker%20-%20the%20Next%20Information%20Revolution.pdf>.

suggested by Drucker). Then, these data are transformed into the information of users' consumption patterns. It's used by companies to personalize services and products⁴.

In the 20th century, information was transmitted by newspapers, television, and radio. But first, it underwent a specialized human curatorship. While it reduced the amount of misinformation, it also reduced the population's access to a greater diversity of information. Today, with information exponential growth, we feel that because of its immense amount there's no filter.

But this filter exists, and it's a curatorship made by Big Data algorithms⁵. It collects data from our research on the internet, preferences, and real-time interactions on social media. Then they're connected to our profile, allowing whoever possesses them to know who we are and how we think. The algorithms control what we receive for a commercial matter: companies that don't use this mechanism to relate to its audience become obsolete. Thus, everything we receive is directed to us according to our interests. While there's the benefit that we easily find what we're looking for, this curatorship harms our opportunity to have contact with distinct opinions.

III. Filter bubble

This use of Big Data isolates certain groups to coexist only with subjects of their interest. This also includes people. On social media, breaking contact with those who express opinions that bother us is easier than in reality: just one unfollow, one block. When isolation is a faster answer than dialogue, it's a sign that we've lost our argument ability. These isolated social circles are known as filter bubbles⁶. They're composed of people who share the same worldview as a consequence of the algorithms' curatorship.

In contact with only one side of the story, we take it as the truth and shape our opinion based on it. These bubbles undermine critical thinking and people's reasoning capacity by exposing them only to the information they find pleasant, thus there's no need for them to disagree. That's one reason we're living in a politically polarized world, and the filter bubble phenomenon has a significant role in its construction. When two bubbles collide, the result isn't dialogue (which wasn't being practiced), but aggressiveness. The problem is not Big Data, but its usage to limit information. As we rarely see that we live inside a bubble, and we end up being influenced by what we

⁴ David Lazer, "The rise of the social algorithm", *Science*, June 5, 2015, <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/348/6239/1090>.

⁵ Finite sequence of executable actions that aim to obtain a solution for a determinate type of problem.

⁶ Eli Pariser, *How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 4.

receive from our social circle without checking its veracity. This makes the land fertile for manipulation.

IV. Information manipulation

In 1937, radio was used to disclose the Cohen Plan⁷ in Brazil. By that time, technology already showed itself as a useful tool to shape people's worldview, even with lies. Today, sharing information without checking its veracity has become increasingly common, either because of its vast amount, or because it comes from someone in whom we trust. This is precisely the aim of fake news⁸: to get the message to reach actual people, for they're the ones who pass it on and give it credibility.

When we're only conscious about our individual influence in the world, it's easy to think a minor lie won't cause big troubles. And it's from this thought fake news feeds to reach dimensions we can't comprehend if we stay alienated inside our filter bubble. The reality is that fake news can define the future of nations.

A company called Cambridge Analytica collected personal data from 87 million Americans on Facebook and used it to influence their voting perceptions in the 2016 presidential election⁹. The company did this by hitting their fears through the tactic of firehose of falsehood¹⁰. Whoever wants to manipulate us tries to lessen our critical capacity and increase our emotional factor, because then we won't evaluate if the information we're receiving is reliable.

In Brazil, the 2018 electoral battle happened on the cell phone's privacy. Some companies handled fake profiles to spread fake news on WhatsApp and influence people directly¹¹. The difference between seeing fake news on the internet and receiving them on the cell phone is that, in the second case, it's shared by someone we trust. On the internet, we can check its source; on the cell phone, the source is who sent us. Thus, we tend to believe in it. With political polarization, even the disruption between relatives with contrary opinions became a common thing. The problem is not the opinion divergence, but missing dialogue and respect.

⁷ Document prepared and disseminated by Brazilian military to simulate a jewish-comunist revolution, and used as a political instrument for the implementation of a dictatorial regime in the 1930s.

⁸ Deliberated distribution of misinformation or rumor to deceive or obtain financial or political gains.

⁹ *The Great Hack*. Directed by Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim. USA: Netflix, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80117542>

¹⁰ High speed and amount of fake news release used to win by insisting on lies.

¹¹ Nathan Lopes, "Fake News pelo WhatsApp é fenômeno sem precedentes no mundo, diz OEA", *Uol*, October 25, 2018, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticias/2018/10/25/fake-news-pelo-whatsapp-e-fenomeno-sem-precedentes-no-mundo-diz-oea.htm>.

After Jair Bolsonaro won the presidential election, a CPMI¹² investigated the mass shooting of messages on WhatsApp. Until now, the investigation reached the involved companies and 24 thousand phone numbers responsible for the messages. It's also being investigated the connection between Bolsonaro's sons (also politicians) and the spread of fake news after statements from the President's former allies¹³. Although fact check agencies exist in Brazil and around the world, a 2018 MIT study¹⁴ that analyzed 4 million tweets concluded that fake news is much more shared than the genuine ones.

V. *Bursting the bubble*

In a democracy, freedom of expression is a constitutional right, and it also applies to fake news dissemination. But there is a skill we can develop, or even recover, to reduce this dissemination: critical thinking.

According to Moore and Parker¹⁵, it's a careful determination about accepting, rejecting, or suspending the judgment concerning given information and its reliance degree. In practice, it's a way of thinking that allows us to break a situation in pieces, revealing hidden questions and helping us to see it through more angles. Instead of choosing an answer because it sounds right, those who use critical thinking subject all available options to questioning. To do so, we need to inform ourselves correctly by checking the information source. The academic research taught me to ask "who said?" whenever I receive new information.

But how do we know if we are really informing ourselves or just reinforcing existing ideas? It's common to mistake familiarity with knowledge, because the easier we remember something, the more it looks like truth¹⁶. For this reason, misinformation or lies that agree with what we already believe are even easier to be assimilated. We must be careful with ignorance, for it can be so great that it makes us think we dominate an area that we barely know.

To know if we have deep knowledge about a subject, we can list our arguments. Their absence makes people realize they don't possess as much reason as they thought.

¹² Portuguese initials for Joint Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry, investigation conducted by the Federal Senate and the Chamber of Deputies to listen to testimony and take information.

¹³ Patrik Camporez, "CPMI mira no 'gabinete do ódio' em investigação sobre disseminação de fake news", *Uol*, December 6, 2019, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2019/12/06/cpmi-mira-no-gabinete-do-odio-em-investigacao-sobre-disseminacao-de-fake-news.htm>.

¹⁴ Peter Dizikes, "Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories", *MIT News Office*, March 8, 2018, <http://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>.

¹⁵ Brooke Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking* (California: Mayfield Pub. Co., 1986), 4.

¹⁶ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, fast and slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 91-92.

It's checking how much we know that critical thinking is built. If you believe in everything you hear, you are not thinking. If you hear and believe in what you're already certain of, you are not thinking either. We need to set aside our personal beliefs and get to know diversity, like the opinion from people outside our filter bubble, to expand our knowledge and our worldview. Just as Peter Drucker lived between different cultures and even came to Brazil in the 1950s.

VI. *The effective leadership*

If the fact of a population living in filter bubbles is already a grave problem by itself, it becomes even worse when also the political leaders are inside the bubble. It isn't only our duty to develop critical thinking skills, but also that of our governors. And they must be our example.

In Peter Drucker's words, leadership is "the lifting of a man's vision to higher sights, the raising of a man's performance to a higher standard, the building of a man's personality beyond its normal limitations"¹⁷. The Behavioral Theory detaches two types of leadership: autocratic and democratic. The first one is characterized by authority centered on a leader who doesn't allow his subordinates to take part in the decision-making process; the second one is about a leader who decides with his team, encouraging everyone to take part in the process.

In the article "The Effective Decision"¹⁸, Drucker highlights that the hardest is not deciding, but making it work. He breaks down the effective decision-making process in six steps: classification, definition, specifications, decision, action, and feedback. The first three are about problem identification, analysis, and understanding the conditions to solve it. The decision is made, and the last steps teach how to put it into practice, besides monitoring its effectiveness after application and learning with the results.

Although Drucker said that there's no ideal form to organize companies or people¹⁹, it's important to highlight that decisions need to be unified and centralized. Conflicting decisions become confused actions with ineffective results. The leadership's success is tied directly to the effectiveness of the decision-making.

¹⁷ Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 302-303.

¹⁸ Peter F. Drucker, "The Effective Decision", *Harvard Business Review*, January, 1967, <https://hbr.org/1967/01/the-effective-decision>.

¹⁹ Peter F. Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 21.

Even if a team takes part in the process, it's up to the leader to decide. In the foreword of "The Leader of the Future"²⁰, Drucker highlights ten characteristics of an effective leader. Among them, tolerating the diversity of those who can bring a contribution, do not fear the capacity of associates, being responsible, being an example, admitting mistakes, and being able to come around.

VII. *Is experience time synonymous with effective leadership?*

It's common for us to associate experience time with qualification and to expect that older leaders will be more effective than younger ones. However, the current world scenario related to the Covid-19 pandemic has questioned this kind of thought. An unknown disease demands even more that government leaders use their critical thinking skills since it's harder to decide without enough information about the problem. In times of crisis, fear is a constant feeling. It increases the force of fake news, making it harder for the leader to engage his population to follow his decisions.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is currently the youngest head of state in the world at 33 years old. After a problematic alliance that culminated in the fall of his first government, he was elected again and returned making an unprecedented alliance in his country with the opposition. His first decision related to the Covid-19 pandemic was the country lockdown three days after the first confirmed death by the virus. After four weeks, the contagion rate was reduced almost by 80%²¹.

Kurz makes decisions with his team and communicates them clearly and objectively to the citizens. In this current crisis, they're the ones who will transform the decision into action. We can learn that the leader and his team's joint voice orienting towards only one direction engages people to act according to what's recommended. When the leader is an example, it ensures the decision to be effective. Kurz himself followed social isolation, made his bulletins behind glass protection, and is seen wearing a mask in public.

Now the Chancellor works on a gradual reopening for Austria and its economy, making new decisions according to the feedback from previous ones, inspiring hope and precaution in the population. Since his alliance with the opposition to his success in restraining the virus, Sebastian Kurz shows that his critical thinking ability gives

²⁰ Frances Hesselbein *et al.*, *The Leader of the Future: New Visions, Strategies and Practices for the Next Era* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1997), 7-8.

²¹ Ana Estela de Sousa Pinto, "Quarentena reduziu em quase 80% taxa de contágio do coronavírus na Áustria", *Folha de S. Paulo*, April 15, 2017, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/eqilibrioesaude/2020/04/quarentena-reduziu-em-quase-80-taxa-de-contagio-do-coronavirus-na-austria.shtml>

him a wide worldview that allows him to focus his decisions on what's right instead of what's acceptable and easy.

Other young heads of state also contained the virus' spread, like Sanna Marin (34) in Finland, Jacinda Ardern (39) in New Zealand, Carlos Alvarado (40) in Costa Rica and Leo Varadkar (41) in Ireland. All of them have shown the democratic leadership type, unified voice, transmission of confidence and clear information. And the most important: an effective decision-making process like Drucker's one.

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro (65) has in years of political experience the same amount as Sebastian Kurz has in age. Even before the pandemic, he often stepped back in his decisions, which shows that his decision-making process is flawed and based on impulsivity. The pandemic further exposed the government's internal chaos: Bolsonaro can't reach a consensus with subordinates who think differently from him. He discharged the Health Minister which defended quarantine and, in less than a month, his successor resigned due to divergences with the President. The country faces an unprecedented health crisis with its most important Ministry leaderless.

Bolsonaro minimizes the virus's severity and is an example of his own beliefs. He has been in an average of one crowding a day²² during the pandemic in pro-government acts made by his electorate. The state governors tried to follow the international recommendations when guiding the population, but the conflict with the President's speech turned any decision into ineffective ones. It divides the direction that people must follow. Bolsonaro rules by creating chaos, lives in the filter bubble shared with his electorate and shows an inability of critical thinking. In Brazil, the pandemic has been politicized between two extremes: the left and right-wing.

Adopting lockdown as the last option, instead of it being one of the first measures to contain the virus, was a decision that resulted in exorbitant numbers of cases and fatalities. Similar ineffective decisions were taken by older and experienced leaders like Giuseppe Conte (55) in Italy, Viktor Orbán (56) in Hungary, Stefan Löfven (62) in Sweden, Andrés Obrador (66) in Mexico, Donald Trump (73) in the USA and Daniel Ortega (74) in Nicaragua.

The more conflicting the leader's decision, the greater the force of fake news to manipulate people. When we fear an unknown disease, we tend to cling to any information that brings us comfort, like the dangerous belief in the effectiveness of a medication without its scientific proof. And it gets even worse when this kind of misinformation is supported by the heads of state, like Trump and Bolsonaro with chloroquine.

²² Arthur Sandes, "Bolsonaro esteve, em média, em uma aglomeração por dia durante a pandemia", *Uol*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/2020/05/17/bolsonaro-esteve-em-media-em-uma-aglomeracao-por-dia-durante-a-pandemia.htm>.

It can be said, in the current moment of crisis, that the younger leaders have shown to be capable enough of critical thinking to make effective decisions and guide their population with responsibility. It also shows that the legacy of Peter Drucker isn't limited to management. His teachings on leadership and decision-making can also be used to save lives.

VIII. At last...

Humans always needed to classify or to group people according to their worldview: left-wing and right-wing, the West and the East, north and south hemisphere. But maybe this necessity should be reviewed.

The current world situation goes far beyond extreme opposites, where who favors one side rejects everything that comes from the other. For example, we in the West should learn with the sense of collectivity from the East. Both sides can make right and wrong decisions, and it doesn't mean there's a constant good side and a constant bad one. We must not forget that ideologies are created by humans and can fail, just like we can.

While the world keeps dividing itself in extremes, every information revolution will be used to manipulate people increasingly towards extremism. It weakens our critical thinking and argumentation ability. These are skills that need to be developed throughout the joint learning process, deconstructing presuppositions in society for improvement and progress. The political leader who works with truth doesn't fear his population's critical thinking. He invests in his country's education quality so this skill can be developed on a large scale.

The lack of investment in education is the factor that makes the population more easily manipulated, and those who work with lies take advantage of this. In Brazil, we usually say that "lie has a short leg", therefore it won't go far, and it also applies to the leaders who ground their governments on information manipulation: truth arrives and shows how its structures are fragile. As Peter Drucker already said: "There are no underdeveloped countries. There are only "undermanaged" ones"²³.

²³ Peter F. Drucker, *The Daily Drucker: 366 Days of Insight and Motivation for Getting the Right Things Done* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004), 56.