

Stimulating Nuance is Stimulating Thought

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Before February 2004, there was no Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter —each launched about a year apart, starting then. In twenty years, these three megacorporations have changed the way we communicate and relate to one another, though at the time we could not have imaged to what extent.

Twitter hinted at the possibility that everyone, wherever we might be, could take part in public conversations; and YouTube promised us the chance to create audiovisual content without the intermediation of producers and media owners deciding who got a platform, who appeared on screen, or what audiences were allowed to see.

It was an unprecedented democratization of public space. A conversation about aspects of public life, now open to everyone without hierarchies or filters. The assumption was that the more people expressed their opinions publicly, the richer any discussion would become, nourished by as many nuances as contributions the topic might inspire.

Could anything be more democratic?

But if there is a thankless trade, it is that of the prophet, especially when one predicts what seems obvious. Twenty years after the communication revolution that was supposed to put

everyone's voice within everyone's reach, citizens are not better informed, public opinion has not become more horizontal, and the world is no more democratic.

According to Joan Hoey, director of the Democracy Index at The Economist Intelligence Unit, humanity is experiencing what is referred to as a prolonged democratic recession. A report published in 2024 by that organization (twenty years after the launch of Facebook) indicates that the world is at its lowest level since 2006 (the year Twitter was created), with a score of 5.17 out of 10 on that index. Of the 167 countries analyzed, only 7% of the global population lives in one of the 25 that can be considered full democracies.

Could there be a connection between the timing of the rise of social networks (meant to help democratize public discussion) and the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism? To what extent might they be responsible for the disinformation, polarization, and political manipulation that have contributed to democracy's erosion?

Twenty years later, if anything is clear, it is that the assumption that a greater number of voices would mean greater plurality of ideas did not prove so obvious in practice. Nor that the "knowledge society" would be the great panacea. And this may be explained by one fact: these social networks were not created to deepen democracy and freedom of expression, but to ensure people spent as much time as possible within their boundaries. Their creators were not thinking of citizens but of users. In other words, consumers.

So, if the goal was to keep people consuming content on social media for as long as possible, the design of their algorithms

would aim to offer each user the greatest amount of content aligned with their profile (including like-minded opinions). This may work well for bringing together people who enjoy dark-humor films or who are fond of romantic novels set in dystopian worlds. However, it is far less beneficial when it comes to debating controversial topics such as abortion, migrants' access to public services, or same-sex marriage, to name just a few.

On the other hand, fostering in users the habit of sharing only with those who think like them did not help them exercise the muscle of tolerance; on the contrary, it encouraged them to radicalize their opinions as a way of safeguarding them from those who might disagree.

What happens when people regularly socialize with others they tend to agree with, yet do so in a space where other individuals —people they don't know, who share no common references— are also participating in the same conversations?

A shared language doesn't mean shared understanding

Add to this the rise of the influencer and the obsession with profitability, we end up with a space far less democratic than the one we had when our only public communication options were letters to the newspaper editor or live calls to radio talk shows.

This dynamic reduces discourse to the realm of slogans. Social media has simplified the exercise of thought to the point where developing ideas has become nearly impossible. In other words, they reduce reality to phrases as hard to refute as they are to defend.

The speed of publishing, the limited willingness to read carefully, and the dominance of visuals over text are shaping public opinion into one with fewer independent views and a greater tendency to align with dominant sides in a discussion. Nuance gradually thins out until it disappears from the core of the debate, since the algorithm favors interactions that generate high activity (controversial opinions) or those that carry the most weight. And when interactions become polarized and flattened, is there any real possibility of forming an opinion?

More importantly, is there any real chance to choose?

These are times of slogans and Manichaeism, a perfect environment that paves the way for the rise of leaders who manipulate public opinion with half-truths, distorted realities, exaggerated dangers, and the stirring of collective fears. Times in which influence is exerted not through convincing argument but through vehement assertion. This has given rise to demagogues, manipulators, and populists who emerge after the political ideas that once shaped the world have collapsed in the face of a reality they can no longer explain. These are times of gentrification, process automation, and new technological empires in which “human rights” are nonexistent on the agendas of power groups, and where productivity and performance are the only valid measures.

It would be difficult for democracy to be strengthened in such an environment. Easy, however, for de facto powers to take advantage of this dynamic to impose frameworks of opinion that foster division and polarization as tools for maintaining control.

How can consensus be built (which is the purpose of politics) when the only way to confront a discourse is to assemble a group

of equal size and force? This makes it impossible to gather the sum of perspectives that would form a common idea. Citizens are left trapped in extreme, polarized, and radical positions that benefit only those who promote them.

This is where disinformation and the one-sided communication that social media readers have grown accustomed to come into play. Examples of this can be seen every day. A recent case is the extradition of Venezuelans to El Salvador under the Trump administration. The Chavista regime (which holds prisoners without fair trial) took up the banner of defending those extradited, which caused many people to position themselves on the opposite side without attempting to develop a measured stance. It was not about agreeing with the expulsions; that detail was overshadowed by a simpler logic: the point was to oppose Chavismo.

Another side of the issue was focusing the discussion on whether tattoos identify gang members, generating a controversy that overlooked the core matter. This tactic is often used by those in power to distract from substantive issues in decision-making, avoiding public scrutiny. They know how to stir the masses, who have little capacity to develop ideas, and place them wherever they wish.

Each case has its particular considerations. Every human being is unique. But that notion carries no weight in the dynamics of social networks, which are factories of slogans crafted to be wielded in a tweet. And the simpler they are, the more likes they get.

Those in power often lie, but on social media, they do so with a precise intention: they take advantage of the bewilderment and confusion generated by information overload, so that people

choose not to believe anything they read. One lie cancels out the truth. This is how reality is experienced in the so-called information society.

This logic is evident in the fact that the opinion of someone with sufficient power becomes a law that overrides even what the laws themselves state. And in the absence of a solid institutional structure, it effectively becomes the Law.

Twitter is not public life, but its logic has been transferred to public life. It is not reality, yet it represents it to the point where the two are confused.

The loss of Petare as an electoral stronghold of Chavismo occurred gradually and steadily over several years. The breaking point came on the night of July 28, when videos circulated showing people celebrating in the streets after the results were announced at polling stations in this vast urban conglomeration. The following day, a spontaneous protest set out from there, moving through Caracas, until police and armed civilians managed to disperse it on Baralt Avenue, just a few blocks from Miraflores.

By the night of July 28, it was evident that Petare was lost as an electoral stronghold for Chavismo, and the repression and cordon put in place in the following days completely extinguished any remaining support from the community.

Politically and electorally neutralized among its residents, the symbolic and strategic significance of a neighborhood —or more accurately, an interconnected network of neighborhoods— like Petare pushed the regime to consider it urgent to regain control at any cost.

One of the “landings” in this takeover was the Matapalo sports court, located in the San Blas neighborhood, the epicenter of a citizen project led by the organization *Uniendo Voluntades*, which had transformed it into an open-air museum of graffiti and murals. One day, a crew of municipal workers arrived with instructions to “recover” the court, which had been the pride of a community that turned a truck parking lot into a first-rate sports facility. The crew repainted (erased) the work of local residents and several muralists from various places, who had contributed their enthusiasm to a project that went beyond cleaning and painting, promoting workshops in film, photography, literature, comics, and other artistic disciplines.

This process, which developed over several years, produced a valuable pool of creators within that community. In the face of the crushing of this remarkable work (too much autonomy for the liking of people who need to control), Katy Camargo, the leader of the organization, stated, “They are not erasing anything from us. We are agents of change.”

And it was not a matter of resignation, but of the certainty that the purpose of the movement had been achieved: for residents, under the motto “el barrio también es ciudad,” to see themselves as dignified citizens.

They knew that the court was a symbol of an entire body of work. Still, as such, it was only a visible representation of something already internalized and matured among its inhabitants, and therefore impossible to colonize: the exercise of thought, community organization, the decision to live with dignity, and the expression of a worldview through artistic creation.

Another interesting experience in times of constricted spaces for dialogue is the digital media outlet *La Vida de Nos*, which aims to document the country's contemporary history through the perspective of ordinary people. One of its principles asserts that telling life stories is a way to combat a single narrative. In pursuit of this goal —telling life— they have already produced nearly eight hundred stories: eight hundred personal testimonies that convey the complexity of the country through its nuances.

**Life in common, seen through the diversity
of each experience**

And so, there are several collective experiences of art consumption in the city that help combat the imposition of a single voice. Outdoor cinema organized by Circuito Gran Cine in various communities, events by La Poeteca, and even the widespread street art gatherings bring people together to coexist and respect others' visions of shared space. Each individual possesses a reality that deserves to be heard because it enriches that of others. That is what it is about. Small exercises with great significance. Against the singular story, it is the certainty that each perspective adds to the chorus of expressions about our shared human experience. Coming together as an exercise in citizenship, community, and respect for one another.

Stimulating creativity and the consumption of artistic expressions combats the imposition of thought, Manichaeism, and polarization; it educates critical individuals capable of discerning and dissenting from their own reality regarding life's issues, rather than blindly subscribing to dominant narratives. People who ask questions and accept no answer as absolute, contrary to what public discussion on social media promotes, where polarized,

Manichaeism, and manipulative slogans dominate discourse, distorting and impoverishing the perception of reality.

The system is designed so that people cannot choose, and therefore cannot think. Artistic expression is the representation of life seen from within. It is the reflection of who we are as beings born into a culture. It encourages inquiries into the values we take as valid.

Joseph Campbell noted that the function of art is to reveal that light which shines in all things. The beautiful organization behind a well-composed work reminds us of the order present in our own lives; an order, it is worth noting, from which we are frequently distracted amid daily agitation. Seeing the world from a broader perspective refocuses us on what we must not forget to avoid alienation.

And most importantly, art stimulates compassion. The understanding that the other is as mysterious and sacred, as incredible and inevitable, as oneself. That within the other lies a unique universe, and therefore their perspective enriches our own. Promoting the practice and consumption of artistic expressions becomes an antidote to times of slogans. Modest and without guarantees, of course, but one of the few tools humanity has to avoid forgetting its condition.