

The Critical Role of Communication in a Post-Truth World

Marcelo Knobel

Higher education institutions are facing a fierce campaign across the world that questions their value and significance. In Brazil, for instance, accusations against universities vary from ridiculous claims that they are “nests of Communists” and “lawless places” (where drugged, drunk, naked people party continuously) to more sophisticated assertions concerning their autonomy, management, and activities.

This is not the first time that universities have been in such an uncomfortable position. Among the oldest institutions in society, they have actually resisted several attacks over the last millennium. However, the advent and increasing importance of social media, combined with the consolidation of the so-called “post-truth era,” have added a new element to the current wave of criticism, raising its potential impact to unprecedented levels.

The Danger of Pseudoscience, Conspiracy Theories, and Other Fake News

The ongoing assault on universities must be taken seriously. From presidential elections to the rise of deniers and conspiracy theorists, there are numerous examples of contemporary events that have been strongly influenced by social media. Indeed, recent studies indicate that online enthusiasts of pseudoscience hold an edge over those who believe in real science. Most YouTube videos related to climate change, for instance, oppose the scientific consensus that it is caused by human activity. The majority either

Abstract

We are currently living in a world where it is extremely hard to separate nonsense from truth, opinion from grounded arguments. The consequences for society can be disastrous, together with long-term damage to science, technology, and higher education institutions. A more robust and aggressive communications strategy, with modern language and strong messages, is more necessary than ever to face the so-called “post-truth” era.

Most YouTube videos related to climate change, for instance, oppose the scientific consensus that it is caused by human activity.

deny this fact or claim that the climate change thesis derives from a conspiracy. Those touting conspiracy theories are the ones that receive the highest numbers of views.

Unfortunately, climate change is far from the only topic about which scientific dishonesty triumphs online over scientific facts. The same applies to issues such as infectious diseases and the measles–mumps–rubella (MMR) vaccine, just to mention a few examples. Although there is plenty of information online about the vaccine’s safety, false allegations that it causes harmful effects have spread extensively across the internet. As a result, vaccination levels have dropped in many countries around the world, opening the doors for the return of diseases that were almost eradicated.

Building Defenses in the Post-Truth War

Social media plays a major role in spreading misinformation. Scientists and higher education institutions need to be more proactive in developing creative and compelling ways to communicate research findings to broader audiences. More importantly, it is crucial that they bear in mind how maliciously manipulated information can affect people’s behavior, either individually or as a group.

Confronting this problem is a complex task. By providing corrective or educational information on a given topic, one can simply reinforce people’s awareness of the existing untruths about it. An important step is to overcome resistance to people’s ideological beliefs and biases. Another one is to develop people’s ability to think critically, so they can tell the difference between real information and misinformation. Scientists and faculty also need to become more involved in the conflict, in order to make sure that their work is understood and valued—and not misused. They must use innovative and persuasive strategies to communicate with the public. This includes creating compelling social media content (both at the institutional and the personal levels), aimed at shifting beliefs and influencing behaviors. Otherwise, the voices from the academy will continue to be smothered by the frequency and ferocity of non-evidence-based messaging.

From the institutional viewpoint, higher education institutions must recognize the strategic importance of communication to reinforce the value of evidence-based information to society. Faculty must be trained to learn and develop new skills to engage with their students and the public, using social media and other contemporary communication strategies. On the one hand, universities should reconsider their information diffusion strategies, to justify the importance and value of public investment. This last aspect is already well developed in private higher education institutions and large research facilities that depend directly on tuition or government resources to survive. On the other hand, public institutions in many countries need to develop better channels to inform society (including politicians) about their fundamental role in the progress of their region and country, explaining the sometimes peculiar ways in which they operate. Otherwise, the fundamental principles of academic freedom and autonomy will be in real danger, lacking supporters in what has become a rather incomprehensible, but really scary, antieducational, and anti-intellectual reality that is increasingly taking shape. ▲

Marcelo Knobel is rector of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp) and full professor at the Gleb Wataghin Physics Institute, Unicamp, Brazil. E-mail: knobel@ifi.unicamp.br.