

Ecologies of Truth in the Network Age: Fake News and the Pedagogical Task

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Abstract: This proposal analyzes how digital co-existence, despite global connectivity, can foster exclusionary “tribal” dynamics rather than an inclusive community grounded in personal dignity. It outlines the conditions for an educating digital *polis* based on mutual recognition, shared norms, and sustained dialogue. Against this backdrop, it addresses fake news as a defining feature of network life and an epistemic-hermeneutic challenge that demands pedagogical responsibility. The paper advances ecological-digital citizenship as a framework for systemic responsibility toward both informational and environmental ecosystems, and frames discernment—attention, care, source-checking, and shared accountability—as a way to reduce the cognitive footprint of falsehood in an age of informational overproduction.

Keywords: information ecology; critical vigilance; democratic *polis*; fake-news.



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1. Educational care and the Person’s Singularity in the digital age

In our time, pedagogical action cannot be reduced either to a technique of transmission or to a measurable performance. It should be understood as a gift: an act that does not demand repayment and is grounded in care—that practical and symbolic disposition that makes any relationship between subjects possible. From this perspective, education is called to support the building of a community able to recognize itself as an educating community also within digital co-existence, which has become structural to everyday life.

The network is not merely a tool; it is a social environment.

It reshapes personal identity and the very form of communal bonds. For this reason, the risks of online sharing concern both the individual’s singularity and the quality of the community. Digital community tends to be mobile and unstable, exposed to dynamics of simplification and polarization. As a result, the “we” can become fragile or aggressive rather than welcoming and formative. At the individual level, the greatest risk emerges when two essential dimensions are not protected: the process of identity construction and the space of autonomous interiority.

In social media interactions—especially frequent among young people—an extensive and often anonymous audience intervenes. This collective gaze can become inquisitorial and violent, taking on “tribal” tones. Under these conditions, the person can lose stability, because they are pushed to judge themselves

continually through the mirror of others' reactions. Approval becomes the guiding criterion, and the unity of the self risks collapsing into conformity.

A second risk concerns continuous self-exposure. Selfies, posts, profiles, and blogs can produce a fragmented representation of the person, multiplying partial images that do not necessarily converge into a coherent self. This fragmentation makes the subject more vulnerable to ridicule and criticism.

During adolescence, when identity is still being formed, vulnerability is higher (Haidt, 2024).

Moreover, online communication tends to modify language and posture in lasting ways: habits of visibility, speed, simplification, and immediate reaction are gradually internalized as normal modes of being-with-others.

These dynamics require a constant, not episodic, pedagogical intervention. A vigilant and present educational gaze is needed within the main formative communities: family and school. Specific preparation is required for both parents and teachers, oriented to the challenges of digital co-existence. The aim is not to demonize the network, but to build competencies of discernment and responsibility. In particular, it is necessary to support a solid awareness of one's own singularity, understood as a source of authenticity and as a criterion for orientation within an interconnected reality. Within this framework, some indications remain valid because they belong to a stable theoretical tradition, especially the personalist tradition. The person possesses an intrinsic value that cannot be negotiated or reduced to social visibility, approval, or performance. One may speak, in this sense, of an inviolable dignity—something in the person that must never be treated as a means, never placed under conditions, never made dependent on the fluctuating verdicts of a crowd. This principle obliges education to promote respect for the person also in digital relationships. The work must begin early, because many digital natives encounter depersonalizing environments before they experience communities capable of genuine welcome. The protection of singularity and the care of one's image—understood as a good to be safeguarded rather than a commodity to display—can become a point of formative resistance. Even within a tightening network of exposure and judgement, it is still possible to preserve a “breach,” a small space of freedom in which the person is not absorbed by the mesh of collective gaze and immediate reaction (Zuboff, 2019). This stance can support a pedagogical paradigm for a global *polis*: a paradigm that matters both when the educating community intervenes in specific episodes of online aggression, such as cyberbullying, and when it recognizes the need to contain a broader, widespread, and persistent virtual tribalism.

Only in this way can the digital community become a livable environment—that is, a place in which relationship does not annul the person, but recognizes and sustains them.

2. Beyond the global village: toward an educating Digital *Polis*

Building a community that, in structure and intention, takes on the traits of an educating community is today one of the most decisive pedagogical responsibilities.

It is not simply a matter of “improving” the climate of online interactions, but of politically and culturally orienting the form of social bonds, because the question of singularity in virtual relationality coincides, at a deep level, with the question of the community we want to make possible.

If in distant times the democratic *polis* also arose as a surpassing of the village logic—more closed, more homogeneous, more exposed to social control—today we face a similar task, but on a global scale. We must go beyond the dimension of the “global village,” which can be vast and connected yet remain tribalized, and build a new democratic *polis*, hopefully inclusive.

This *polis* cannot rest on a collective anxiety of surveillance, nor on forms of inquisitorial collectivism always seeking an exemplary culprit. It must instead be founded on the inviolable singularity of the person: on a principle of dignity that precedes opinion, performance, and membership in a digital tribe.

A crucial point emerges here: when it deteriorates, digital community tends to transform dissent into guilt and difference into threat. In this way it reactivates an ancient dynamic: expelling the other as an act of group “purification” (Girard, 1982).

Karl Popper (1945) described with clarity the difference between village and city, showing how in the village nonconformity could be treated as an anomaly to remove, sometimes even through violence. The temptation to eliminate those who do not align—Popper observes—runs through history and does not disappear with modernity: in the twentieth century it takes administrative and industrial forms, to the point of making tragically “normal” what should remain unthinkable. In other words, the vocabulary changes, but the impulse can remain the same. If we bring this insight into the present, we can recognize a digital version of that dynamic. Today expulsion does not necessarily pass through physical force; more often it passes through symbolic and relational elimination. The verb that condenses this practice is “to ban”: to forbid, to expel. In online jargon, exclusion becomes a rapid, apparently neutral operation, often celebrated as the hygiene of conversation. Yet its underlying meaning remains clear: to drive away, to make the other invisible, unheard, and non-belonging. Even when justified by necessary rules (to protect against real abuses), this logic risks becoming a communal reflex, a punitive automatism: no longer protection, but interdiction; no longer care, but excommunication. For this reason, the pedagogical task is delicate and urgent. Digital natives grow within an online co-existence that tends to become total: not a separate “elsewhere,” but a daily continuity between life and connection. Luciano Floridi (2017) called this condition onlife: a form of existence in which online and offline intertwine to the point that they cannot be thought of as distinct worlds. In an onlife context, linguistic practices are not mere words: they shape norms, habits, hierarchies, and exclusions. If the dominant lexicon is one of interdiction—blocking, reporting, deleting, banning—then the community risks educating toward expulsion rather than encounter. Building a community modelled on an educating community means reversing this drift. It means training discursive responsibility, non-violent management of conflict, and the distinction between critique and humiliation, between rule and persecution. It means defending singularity without idolizing it, and defending community without turning it into a pack. In short: building a digital *polis* in which difference is not a pretext for scapegoating but a resource for democracy; and in which education, before teaching technical skills, safeguards the very possibility of welcome.

3. From tribal liquidity to the Open *Polis*

A *polis* that today truly wishes to qualify as modern cannot merely reproduce the indistinctness of the social liquidity in which we are immersed. It should instead take shape as a surpassing of undifferentiation: an order capable of giving form, rule, and duration to social bonds, according to the idea of the open society outlined by Karl Popper (1945)—that is, as a privileged space for building a robust democracy under critical vigilance.

The experience of the so-called “global village”—which we live firsthand as inhabitants and encounter, as educators, in the daily life of digital natives—seems instead to incline toward a reductive understanding of democracy. Not infrequently, democracy is mistaken for a merely choral, sometimes noisy capacity to feel indignation without argument: an emotional register that tends to replace discussion with reaction. In this dynamic one recognizes what Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) described with regard to groups, even spontaneous ones, that can at times “democratize democracy” or, with the same energies, “de-democratize democracy.” In other words: in a fully interconnected society that often treats virtual relation as the dominant form of the social, democracy risks being perceived as a regime in which the norm is permanent dissent rather than the patient construction of argued consensus. One could say that, without intermediate passages, we have oscillated from one mistaken presumption to another: first, the idea that consensus alone is sufficient to found democracy; then, the mirror idea that only dissent nourishes it. This oscillation produces a pathological image of democratic life: as if democracy were an organism always in crisis, exposed to the treatments of improvised specialists who prescribe massive doses now of consensus and now of dissent, thereby worsening the imbalance they claim to cure (Pellicani, 2002).

Here an ancient lesson is useful. Greek tradition reminds us that *pharmakon* means both remedy and poison: what heals can also destabilize if administered when unnecessary or without care. From this ambivalence emerges a theoretical and educational awareness: not every consensus is democratic, and not every dissent is emancipatory. In this direction, Karl Popper (1945) insists on a decisive point: democracy does not coincide with majority rule, still less with unanimity. A majority can govern tyrannically; an entire people can give its consent to a dictator. Symmetrically, democracy does not become authentic if it mistakes dialogue for continuous liturgies of dissent: ritualized opposition is not, in itself, argument; and argument without shared rules does not produce a public sphere, but only conflict. It is precisely here that the global village shows its most visible limit. If one immerses oneself even for a single day in the main routes of social connection frequented by students, one often encounters a public discourse saturated with rapid oppositions, instant judgments, and collective indignations passed off as critical thinking and compressed into formats that discourage complexity. The result is a conversation weakened in its intra-relational presuppositions: little willingness to listen, lexical impoverishment, reduction of evidence to slogans, and difficulty in sustaining broad and coherent argumentation. In this way we forget that, in an open and non-tribal society, democracy rests on a more demanding foundation: consensus on the rights of those who think differently; recognition of pluralism as an ordinary condition of common life; and the epistemological and political idea of the fallibility of our convictions. In this sense, the decisive element is not “consensus versus dissent” or “dissent versus consensus,” but minimal consensus

on the rules that make non-destructive dissent possible (Pellicani, 2002). To build within the network a community that is both educating and democratic, it is therefore necessary to ground the *polis* in a sober awareness: a society is never perfect or uniform—a recurring dream of utopians and dictators—but it can be improved. Democracy is not a finished model; it is a perfectible, gradual, reformist process. From this follows a consequence: the global village cannot become an authentically democratic space until it renounces the ambition to impose, through wars between digital tribes, a single way of thinking, and until it develops a perspective that values individual responsibility, feasible reform, and progressive adjustment. In this direction, Dario Antiseri (2010) formulates a principle that can serve as an orienting criterion for contemporary co-existence: a global civilization does not coincide with a uniform civilization. Rather, it is a plurality of cultures, worldviews, ethical choices, and customs, and it can be truly global only if it remains open to difference and closed only to the incivility of those who practice violence and intolerance. This selective closure is not a contradiction of the open society; it is its condition of possibility. Only in this way can the digital *polis* overcome the tribal form of the global village and become a place in which democracy is not reduced either to the chorus of consensus or to the ritual of dissent, but is translated into responsibility, argumentation, and respect.

4. From chatter to the *Agorà*: educating democratic dialogue online

A truly mature public opinion—capable of argument, not governed by impulse, not inclined toward intolerance—does not arise automatically from the increased speed and breadth of global interconnection. It is, rather, a slow achievement that requires an additional measure of philosophy of education: work that can reactivate, in the present, the Socratic gesture of the demanding question, the one that refuses easy answers to human problems and aims to make common life and democracy compatible.

The paradigm is well known. Socrates questioned his interlocutors about what “beauty” means, what it means to be a poet, the forms of being, and the figures of love; and he did so without haste, sustaining long conversations, sometimes from dawn to dusk, as Plato’s dialogues attest. This was not an erudite exercise: it was the genesis of a democratic *habitus*. Not by chance, that dialogue took shape in the *agorà*, the place where individual life was exposed to comparison with communal life. Similarly, the contemporary educator who intends to build an educating community within and through the network must recover a space of authentically open discussion, capable of freeing digital democracy from two symmetrical impoverishments: on the one hand, the mechanical repetition of reassuring slogans; on the other, the incessant bouncing of uncritical, often empty reactions that turns participation into a parody of dialogue. Without this care, “democracy” online—even if global—risks becoming hostage to conformist or purely reactive dynamics. The sudden flare-ups of sociability that the network produces every day do not coincide with the *agorà*. They more often resemble chatter in Martin Heidegger’s sense (1927), who contrasts *Gerede* (chatter) with *Rede* (discourse): a kind of speaking that circulates and multiplies but rarely grounds understanding. Or, to use Umberto Eco’s effective formula, they resemble the “sports bar”: a rapid, often self-referential conversation, oriented more toward the quip than the argument. The *agorà*, by contrast, is a more complex device: it is not simply “public” nor simply

“private,” but a place where private and public intertwine in a generative way. Claudio Volpi (2004) defines it as the space in which private problems connect in a meaningful way not in order to obtain narcissistic gratifications or to use the public scene for therapeutic purposes, but to seek collectively managed tools effective enough to relieve individuals from misery suffered in private; a space, finally, in which ideas such as public good, just society, and shared values can arise and take form. Within the networked society, pedagogical responsibility thus becomes more pressing precisely because it cannot be limited to technical or technological competence. It must address, from the foundations onward, the human questions amplified by the network: existential, relational, ethical, and civic questions. For this reason, educational work must begin in the primary places of formation—school and family—and must involve adult education and lifelong learning. Educating for digital citizenship, ultimately, means first of all educating those who educate, so that the educational gesture, embodied in the daily relationships of schooling and parenting, can reopen spaces for responsible speech and real democratic dialogue.

5. Truth as a public task: falsifiability and vigilance

The distance between virtual community and democratic community—and with it, the non-coincidence between the *agorà* and the current spaces of online sociability—becomes evident in a phenomenon that is paradigmatic today: the global circulation of fake news. Their spread, now planetary and largely uncontrollable, is not a side effect of digital modernity, but a structural signal: where the public scene is bent to propagandistic ends, information ceases to be a common good and becomes an instrument of mobilization and domination.

Words then do not open understanding, but produce bewilderment; they do not build bonds, but generate suspicion; they do not orient, but disorient. In this sense, fake news is a contemporary figure of chatter: viral, accelerated, performative, capable of imposing itself not because it is true, but because it is effective in striking, polarizing, and dragging along. In an authentically liberal and democratic *agorà*, false news is not impossible: no *polis* is immune to lying.

Yet falsehood takes root with greater difficulty when the public space is sustained by a decisive epistemological and civic principle: the idea that every assertion must remain exposed to testing, control, and refutation.

Here, the network—if it is to become a *polis*—must adopt a methodological norm: treat information as hypotheses rather than dogmas. Just as scientific theories are such only if they are falsifiable, so—by methodological analogy—news that ricochets through digital connections must be verifiable and, if necessary, disprovable (Arsena, 2018).

Without this criterion, information is not knowledge; it is suggestion. From this follows an eminently political thesis: verification cannot be the monopoly of a few. It must remain available to the entire critical community. A democracy does not merely proclaim freedom of speech; it establishes the conditions under which speech can be subjected to public scrutiny. The price of the open society is vigilance—not a police vigilance, but a rational, widespread, everyday vigilance. It is a discipline of common thinking: patience with sources, sobriety of argument, the ability to distinguish fact from interpretation, and the willingness to revise one’s convictions in the face of contrary evidence. Without this discipline, the digital space becomes a multiplier of beliefs; with it, it can become a laboratory of

responsibility. For this reason, the legitimate “garrison” against the invasion of falsehood does not coincide with censorship or tribal expulsion. It is, first of all, an educational exercise in rational critique: a method that does not arise spontaneously, but is acquired and stabilized as a social habit. It must be accessible to all, otherwise it collapses into its opposite: an aristocracy of truth that, while claiming to save democracy, ends up suspending it.

Here lies the Popperian core that relocates the entire issue onto the proper terrain. Karl Popper (1945) clarifies that democracy is not the answer to the question “who should govern?”, but to the question “how can we control those who govern?”.

Democracy is not the myth of the righteous ruler; it is the institutional and cultural architecture that makes the control of controllers possible. Transferred to the digital domain, this thesis becomes a clear criterion: an online democracy is authentic only if it builds the conditions that allow every citizen to verify, contest, demand reasons, require evidence, and refute with arguments. If this possibility does not exist, the network is not a *polis*: it is an arena; it is not an open society: it is a battlefield among tribes. It is therefore illusory to identify the “global village” with democracy. Globality does not mean pluralism; connection does not mean dialogue; speed does not mean understanding.

Opposition to ignorance, falsehood, and intolerance is not achieved through repeated indignation or emotional rebound; it is achieved through argumentative rationality: the capacity to trace sources, evaluate them, test their consistency, and distinguish proof from propaganda.

Above all, it is achieved through discussion among different positions, and thus through a serious resistance to every form of single, ultimate, and definitive thought.

Finally, a recurring misunderstanding must be avoided. Awareness of the fallibility of human knowledge does not coincide with a confused relativism that denies truth.

On the contrary: recognizing fallibility means keeping truth as a task rather than a possession; it means defending public procedures of control, not dissolving every criterion. In a sober and Socratic sense, “relativism” does not mean that all opinions are true, but that opinions exist and must be examined, and that no absolute model can claim immunity from critique by natural right. It is this stance—epistemic and political at once—that links cultural pluralism and democracy: not the absence of truth, but the choice not to turn truth into an untouchable idol. If this holds, then the problem of fake news is not a secondary matter of media literacy: it is a test of democratic citizenship in the digital age.

Where falsifiability is missing as a cultural norm, the public sphere becomes credulous; where the possibility of control is missing, the community becomes tribalized; where the practice of argued dialogue is missing, democracy remains a word rather than an institution.

And here education is not an accessory: it is the political condition of the open society.

6. The price of Digital Democracy: educating for critical vigilance

At this point, a decisive thesis imposes itself: in a democratic context—and therefore in a genuinely educational context—falsehood, error, and disinformation cannot be addressed with the reflexes of tribal squares. Democracy does not

“disinfest” the public sphere through clamour, panic, and witch-hunts; it does not confuse refutation with punishment; it does not replace argument with expulsion. Its distinctive trait is more demanding and, for that reason, more formative: it recognizes that error is possible and builds public procedures to identify it, discuss it, and correct it without denying the dignity of those who err. Liberal and open societies must take into account the circulation of false news: not out of passive tolerance, but out of anthropological and political realism. False news has always existed and will continue to exist (Magnani, 2021). The decisive question is not whether falsehood will appear, but how a community will respond to it without betraying its democratic vocation. If it responds with censorial filters placed “upstream,” or with an army of gatekeepers of discourse, it risks casting a net that is too tight: a net that does not capture only waste, but also suffocates what disturbs established powers. History teaches that uncomfortable truths have often been the most effective antidote against every form of totalitarianism. “The king is naked” belongs to the category of uncomfortable statements: they must be checked, certainly; but they can be necessary, and they must not be made impossible. Here a decisive pedagogical point comes into play: educating for digital citizenship means educating for public verifiability. Digital natives must be taught that control of plausibility and truth is neither a privilege of the few nor an automatism delegable to algorithms: it is a civic, shared, learnable task. Control must remain fully available to the entire critical community: a citizenry able to trace sources, distinguish fact from opinion, recognize manipulation, argue, and refute. The price of the open society is vigilance: a permanent and widespread vigilance, not police-like but rational. And this vigilance is, first of all, an educational competence to be built. The democratic “garrison” against the invasion of falsehood therefore does not coincide with censorship or tribal expulsion. It is built through a daily exercise of rational critique: a method that does not arise spontaneously, but is formed. This is where school and family become political infrastructures of democracy, because they make possible the acquisition of cognitive and moral habits without which the network remains an arena and not a *polis*. Education, in this sense, is the institution that trains people in the slowness of checking within the speed of circulation. The global village, by contrast, in its new tribal claustrophobia, tends to choose remedies worse than the disease. It has built a seductive conceptual totem: the idea that disinformation is comparable to counterfeiting money. The analogy seems strong, but it is logically flawed and pedagogically dangerous. Counterfeit money is a crime because, within civil co-existence, it has been agreed that a single institution (for example, a central bank) is entrusted with issuing genuine currency. It is therefore coherent to repress private issuances that would undermine trust in the system. But in the world of ideas, theories, and news—that is, in the world of knowledge—there cannot be, and must not be, a “state mint of news,” a central bank of truth, or a customs house of ideas that turns into a tribunal of what is permissible (Arsena, 2018). If it existed, one of the foundations of the open society would vanish: the refusal of any epistemic monopoly. In the field of those who seek truth there is no sovereignty, Albert Einstein recalled; and anyone who pretends to become the definitive arbiter of truth would ultimately be overwhelmed by reality itself and by the irony of history (Antiseri, 2010). A democracy that hands truth to a single authority—even when it does so “to protect”—betrays its educational grammar: it does not form citizens; it produces informational subjects. Here the political and pedagogical knot of the

present emerges. If the global village is the place where medium and message tend to coincide (McLuhan, 1964), and if the network is experienced as a closed space in which a few companies control the means and therefore orient the ends; if large platforms become almost immovable infrastructures of search, relationship, and knowledge, holding data, names, faces, identities; then it becomes even more urgent to recall, every day, the meaning of democratic life: not to delegate truth, but to cultivate the capacity to seek it. This process has an ancient name and a formative function: critical spirit. Democracy lives by methodological doubt, not cynical doubt; by verification, not suspicion; by reasons, not noise. In pedagogy, this translates into a precise task: teaching problematization. To problematize means to pose issues, discuss, and go deeper; it means withdrawing from immediate reaction and emotional shortcuts; it means learning to remain beyond 140 characters, beyond impulse, beyond pack logic. In short, it means educating for complexity as a form of responsibility. From this follows a theoretical and political outcome that is difficult to evade: without problematization there is no digital democracy, only connected tribalism. The network will become a *polis* only if we can transform connection into judgment, access into discernment, visibility into responsibility. And this passage does not happen by itself: it happens when school and family, together, form people capable of source-checking, argued dialogue, listening to difference, and rejecting single-thought. If we succeed in this educational and political task, the global village can cease to be a tribal village and become an open community: a contemporary *polis*, the necessary condition for a genuine knowledge society.

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