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DIANA URIBE: Fighting the viral spread of fake news

Liliana Lopez Jimenez wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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“No, not this text again!” Diana Uribe just could not believe it. Uribe was a well-known and highly respected cultural broadcaster and entrepreneur in Colombia who had been the target of a repeated fake news attack between 2016 and 2017. A text message that was falsely attributed to Uribe had been circulating on social media since August 2016. The message expressed radical opinions against the ongoing peace-building efforts in her country. The text message was opposite to Uribe’s views on the topic. When the message first appeared, she quickly reacted by issuing a video in which she detached her name from the message and clarified her own views.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In February 2018, in the midst of the highest wave of controversy ever faced by social media platforms regarding their standing as the most prominent fake news carriers across the globe, and shortly before presidential elections in Colombia, the message had started to circulate again. Uribe wondered if there was anything else she should do to prevent the message from spreading further and doing more harm.

**FAKE NEWS WORLDWIDE**

In 2018, fake news—fabricated content deceptively presented as genuine news[[2]](#footnote-2)—was not a new phenomenon. However, its magnitude had risen to unprecedented levels with the massive penetration of social media platforms in daily life. Many commentators were extremely concerned about the toxic effects of deceptive content benefiting from the same algorithms that enabled the viralization of advertising or genuine, ordinary content on social media. After social media outlets in the United States had published several fake news stories, executives from Facebook, Twitter, and Google were called in to testify before the U.S. congress in October 2017. They were asked to explain the role their companies played in the spreading of false content related to the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the so-called “post-truth” era, it was unclear to what extent fake news influenced important political events such as the U.S. presidential election results or the vote in favour of Brexit in the United Kingdom.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, many media outlets, public figures, and ordinary citizens had started to worry about the consequences of deceptive use of social media for democratic events.

Fake news could also harm businesses, as was seen in the so-called 2016 “Pizzagate” phenomenon, when a fabricated story implicated presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in a secret child-trafficking ring operating in the basement of a pizza restaurant in Washington D.C. The event seriously affected the reputation of the targeted pizza restaurant. For about a month, the restaurant was flooded with malicious criticism on social media, the owner’s private life was scrutinized, the owner was harassed online, and, ultimately, the restaurant was attacked by an armed person in December of that year. It took the restaurant several months to recover from the destructive event.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even large multinational corporations such as Monsanto Company, Starbucks Corporation, and The Coca-Cola Company were subjected to fake news attacks, despite their financial and legal resources. These companies had to convince their stakeholders that stories reported in the media were false.

Fake news could take many forms such as text messages that contained false information. Some of these messages were accredited to incorrect authors. More sophisticated formats included deceptively edited images, audio, or video. Advances in artificial intelligence had made it possible to convert an audio clip into a false, but realistic, lip-synced video of the speaker,[[6]](#footnote-6) a technological capability that could potentially lead to harmful use.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Media outlets had to develop an effective way to contain the spread of fake news in order to remain credible. Traditional containment mechanisms relied on human-based fact checking practices. In the United States, Scopes and Truth or Fiction were among the most highly respected fact checking outlets. Human-based fact checking was a valuable tool, but it was also limited in scope, given the sheer volume of fake news being produced and spread through social media. In response to mounting pressure from various sources, the giants of social media technology—Facebook, Google, and Twitter—were announcing and implementing a mix of measures to combat the fake news problem. Such measures included applying artificial intelligence to identify and block fake content and fake accounts;[[8]](#footnote-8) using trust indicators and standardized disclosures to alert users about the ethics, work practices, and background of information sources; and redesigning the newsfeed.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Despite such improvements, criticism remained strong. In February 2018 alone, disgruntled voices included multinational corporation Unilever,[[10]](#footnote-10) comedian Jim Carrey,[[11]](#footnote-11) and members of the U.K. parliament.[[12]](#footnote-12) All these sources were demanding more efficient action by technology companies against the spread of fake news.

**FAKE NEWS in colombia**

In Colombia, the largest and best documented fake news scandal in the time of social media concerned the peace deal between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The negotiations between the two sides, which had started in 2012, began to show promising signs of a final agreement in early 2016. As part of the agreement, Colombians would be called to vote on whether or not to accept the peace agreement. After the deal was signed, a plebiscite was announced to take place on October 2, 2016. Campaigners for both sides of the plebiscite—“Yes” and “No”—had started working some time before then. In October, the “No” side won by a slight margin of 50.2 per cent to 49.8 per cent.[[13]](#footnote-13) The government and the FARC were forced to continue negotiations. The two sides reached an adjusted agreement that was signed on November 24, 2016. The agreement obtained approval a few days later from Colombia’s Congress.

A couple of days after the plebiscite vote, Juan Carlos Vélez, the campaign director for the No side, confirmed in an interview what many Colombians already suspected and some media had already reported:[[14]](#footnote-14) the campaign had used misleading information to instil feelings of indignation and fear in people about the peace deal.[[15]](#footnote-15) Not all false news about the peace deal could be attributed to the official No campaign. However, a post-truth effect similar to that of the Brexit and 2016 U.S. presidential election seemed plausible, according to respected academics, the media, and many Colombian citizens.

The most popular social media platforms in Colombia were Facebook and WhatsApp, which were used by 70 per cent and 60 per cent of the population, respectively, according to a study commanded by the Ministry of Information Technologies.[[16]](#footnote-16) The WhatsApp messaging service differed from Facebook in important ways. On Facebook, the spreading of messages depended on both user behaviour and a company-created algorithm, whereas on WhatsApp it depended solely on user sharing behaviour. WhatsApp was also less dependent on a fast Internet connection than Facebook was, which contributed to its appeal in poorer countries, including India and Brazil.[[17]](#footnote-17) In April 2016, WhatsApp added end-to-end encryption to all messages shared on its platform, which improved privacy for users but also made the spread of fake news virtually impossible to detect, let alone curtail.

Because WhatsApp had become a particularly popular social media platform for sharing politically-oriented posts in Colombia, it was targeted by emerging local efforts to contain the effects of fake news. La Silla Vacía, a widely-read, award-winning political blog in the country, launched its WhatsApp lie detector in January 2017. The lie detector used human-based fact-checking methodology to investigate WhatsApp chain messages. La Silla Vacía focused its efforts on claims that could be verified, dismissing opinion-based messages. Interested users could re-send the suspect message to La Silla Vacía’s WhatsApp account to have it checked within days. During the first six months of operations, La Silla Vacía reported that 90 per cent of checked chain messages were false.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**DIANA URIBE**

A philosopher by training, Uribe had spent the last 30 years of her life studying world history, with an emphasis on non-violent movements and peace-building efforts around the world. Uribe attained public recognition in the late 1990s when working for the morning radio show of a newly-founded radio station led by Yamid Amad, one of the most important journalists in the country. She became known for both her knowledge of world history and her conversational style, which made her commentaries very accessible to any radio listener.

In 2000, Uribe was offered a weekly time slot on Sundays at Caracol Radio, the top Colombian news radio station, based on ratings. Her radio show “History of the World” enjoyed a large base of listeners from diverse backgrounds. A hallmark of the show was the blending of historical information with cultural references from movies and popular music. For example, in a show about the Irish conflict in the late 20th century, she would play a fragment of the song “Sunday Bloody Sunday” by the rock band U2; in a show about the American civil rights movement, she would encourage her listeners to watch the film “Selma.” In 2002, her show was awarded the Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar, the highest recognition in Colombia in the field of journalism.[[19]](#footnote-19)

For Uribe, the show became the launching pad for her work on various cultural projects. Between 2008 and 2016, she published seven audiobooks with Penguin Random House, some of which became national bestsellers. She was also regularly hired to speak publicly on a number of topics; many times the topic was peace. In partnership with Paideia, a local cultural organization, she organized trips around the world in which she acted as cultural guide. In 2011, she launched a cultural centre called “La Casa de la Historia,” which later became a website where she hosted her radio series and additional content on topics relating to her work. Again, the content emphasized non-violence and peace building.[[20]](#footnote-20) These activities were normally supported by a team of three people: a personal assistant; a historian; and a website and social media manager. Other freelance professionals would be hired for the production of specific projects, especially audiobooks.

The impact of Uribe’s work was widely acknowledged in Colombia, attested by the fact that in 2017, Uribe was listed among the top 10 most powerful women in the country by a respected business magazine.[[21]](#footnote-21) Uribe’s work had also started to gain international recognition. Among other achievements, she was awarded the Gusi Peace Prize in 2011 and was invited as the keynote speaker for the 2016 Annual Lecture of the Pan African Writers’ Association.

In short, Uribe was a very influential voice in Colombia, with a large base of followers. For the most part, the general public valued, loved, and trusted her work.

Despite a number of invitations to study her own country’s history, Uribe had resisted calls to do so or to publicly comment on Colombia’s internal affairs. In a country where opinions and political activism had taken the life of many people in the past, including some of Uribe’s closest friends, she feared for her personal safety if her personal opinion were to become public information. Only in 2016, with the steady progress of the peace talks in Colombia, did she accept a couple of invitations to express her support of the peace deal.

**THE FALSE MESSAGE**

The plebiscite’s tight results were a vivid demonstration of how polarized the country had become by discussion of the peace deal. Much of the confrontation between people in favour and against the deal took place on social media.

On August 31, 2016, a text message started to circulate on WhatsApp that was wrongly attributed to Uribe (see Exhibit 1). The text was written as an open letter. It imitated Uribe’s story-telling style, which regularly drew on metaphors, to provide a series of arguments against the Colombian peace process. The ideas expressed in the message represented a view drastically opposed to Uribe’s personal view on the Colombian peace process.

Uribe became aware of the text message the next day, when she received it through her WhatsApp account. On September 2, Uribe issued a video informing the public that the text message was not written by her, and clarified her personal opinion on the topic (see Exhibit 2). She posted the video on her official Facebook and Twitter accounts, and shared it personally among her friends, collaborators, and business partners. A few mainstream media outlets, including Caracol Radio, showed their support by publishing notes about the video and the false statement[[22]](#footnote-22) on the same day. Uribe eventually learned that similar attacks were suffered during the same period by other opinion leaders, including journalist Pirry and musician Juanes.

Despite Uribe’s efforts, the false information continued to spread. Starting as a text message on WhatsApp, it was later adapted as a Facebook post, an image on Twitter, and a plain text email. Uribe’s staff did not know exactly how many people had viewed or shared the message, but they believed that WhatsApp was still the main carrier. Uribe referred to the event as a “misinformation campaign,” and believed it was relaunched several times in 2016 and 2017, at crucial moments of the peace process. In February 2018, with presidential elections only two months away, the text message started to circulate once again. On Facebook, the message had been posted by about 40 users between January and March 2018 alone. On the other hand, her disconfirming video had been reproduced over 240,000 times and had been shared almost 9,000 times on Facebook since its release until March 2018.

Uribe felt she had done everything she could to rectify the misinformation. However, she wondered how much damage the false statement had done, and could continue to do, in shaping public opinion. She wondered if the false message would further polarize views about the peace process in the country or damage her public image. She also wondered if there was anything she could do to prevent further damage.

Exhibit 1: The False statement

Listen up!

Some people’s philosophy starts with sophisms based on false premises. There are beautiful, romantic statements, filled with good intentions and attractive to most people in the world, because generally people are good, have great hearts and want good things and a better world where there’s harmony and wellbeing. But those statements are deceptive. They are like lure to fish, or the cheese that leads the mouse to a trap. A lot of people, just like fish or mice, are blind to danger, they might be naïve, or ignorant, accomplices or stupid. These attractive but deceptive statements are:

Let’s stop killing one another: False. Nobody here, on the side of institutions or law-abiding civil society, wants to kill anybody. It’s organized crime that’s killing us. We have to demand them to stop kidnapping us, to stop extorting money from us, to stop killing us. I repeat and stress: We can’t just ask them or beg them, we have to make demands on them, using the strength of our national army and our justice system.

We have to stop the war: False. Which war? Here, we have suffered terrorist attacks by criminals. War is a military confrontation between countries, or civil war, when the confronted factions have great popular support, when there are legitimate authorities on both sides. War is in Bosnia, Croatia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Vietnam, Laos . . . anything else is just crime and terrorism. Is France in war? Germany? Norway? The USA? . . . They’ve all had terrorist attacks and they don’t accept to sit and negotiate away their institutions and their constitutions with murderers. On the contrary, they confront them, they chase them and catch them.

We have to choose between peace and war: False. We all want peace, except from those criminals who want power and their illegal businesses. Don’t try to fool us, decent citizens. Fool them, the terrorists.

We have not defeated the FARC: False. They had been defeated, and they were hidden in caves like rats, and reduced to almost nothing thanks to democratic security. They came up to life again because of a soft-handed policy by this government. Crime doesn’t fully disappear, in any country. The state, with the army, the police force and the judges must supress it and keep it to a minimum. That’s the victory of democracy and its institutions. Colombia is the only country in the world where people think that in order to defeat crime we must give power to criminals and forgive all their crimes.

Nobody will sign peace to go to jail: False. We have proof of that with the paramilitaries. It also happened in Bosnia, and Serbia, and many other cases. People in the lowest ranks will be put back in society, but those in the highest ranks either go to jail or, if they don’t surrender, they are caught and executed.

You want to give your children to war: False. In Colombia, a large percentage of the army and the police force is comprised of professional soldiers. Will the army be finished if peace is signed? Isn’t military service compulsory, with or without the FARC?

The FARC don’t want peace, they want power. React and don’t fool yourselves by mermaid chants, or fishing lures, or cheese.

DO YOUR COUNTRY, YOUR FAMILY AND YOURSELF A FAVOR: SHARE THIS MESSAGE VIA MAIL, WHATSAPP AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

Note: FARC = the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

Source: Company documents. Reprinted with permission from Diana Uribe. Translated by the author from the original text in Spanish.

Exhibit 2: transcription of diana uribe’s rectification video

Hi there!

There’s a text going around, out there in social media, supposedly written by me, with lots of words and opinions that don’t represent at all my work or my beliefs. There is a video, called *Déjemos de Matarnos* (Let’s stop killing one another), which says exactly what I think and how I see things, and that is why I made it. People who know my work know that I have been talking about peace and studying successful peace experiences by nations that have managed to leave war behind. This has been the focus of all my work in all this time, and that is what I believe in. Just now, I’m heading to Ireland, and I’ll ask some questions about this matter.

So, this is to tell you that those words don’t represent me, that I don’t agree with what’s written in there, that none of them are my words, my ideas, or my thoughts. What I want is peace, and I want reflection about how we take advantage of this historic opportunity to leave behind a terrible past. What I believe in and am convinced of is these John Lennon words “Give peace a chance”. All the best to you!

Source: Transcript from video, reprinted with permission, from “Diana Uribe,” Facebook, September 2, 2016, accessed July 17, 2018, [www.facebook.com/DianaUCasadelahistoria/videos/1167600586629462](https://www.facebook.com/DianaUCasadelahistoria/videos/1167600586629462/). Translated by the author from the original text in Spanish.

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