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Preference falsification and the threat to democracy



Freely expressing an opinion in public has never been easy, when from the private point of view it is thought that doing so may compromise one's own relationship with other groups of the same society. However, this feeds plural ignorance and threatens democracy. Researchers from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the Universidad da Coruña have developed a simulation model that explores the role of social hierarchies in opinion dynamics that are conditioned by a "preference falsification". Understanding its mechanisms is an essential tool for a public, free and more rational debate.

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Preference falsification occurs when individuals conceal or misrepresent their true opinions and/or desires out of the belief that if they declare their true views, they will be sanctioned by the authorities or fellow citizens. It is a pervasive phenomenon in everyday life. It occurs, for example, whenever we tell someone that we like their hairstyle or how they have decorated their new apartment, when in fact we think they have quite bad taste. However, it reaches far beyond everyday life and often constitutes a phenomenon entailing important socio-political consequences. In this regard, people often falsify preferences in relation to certain political issues. When this falsification is large scale, can lead to scenarios of pluralistic ignorance where a minority position is perceived as a majority, which is then imposed on the public debate. This is what happened, for example, in countries with true socialism. Public support for communism was almost absolute and the consensus on the virtues of the regime seemed extremely strong. In fact, the vast majority of the population was privately opposed to the

system, as could be seen when the conditions became ripe for individuals to suddenly reveal their true views.

Preference falsification and pluralistic ignorance are also important phenomena in established democracies. We are often confronted with hot-button issues that seem to gain apparent public consensus, with which no one dares to disagree for fear of sanctions (in this case, not fear of legal sanctions, but of disapproval from fellow citizens). Hans Christian Andersen's famous tale of the emperor's new clothes offers a clear and simple illustration of this kind of process. Although people thought privately that the emperor was, in fact, naked, everyone said in public that they saw the emperor dressed in fine clothes. Thus, every individual in the story thought that their opinion was in the minority and dared not express it publicly for fear of looking foolish. There is reason to believe that the almost unanimous support for certain feminist demands, for example, follows this pattern. In this regard, preference falsification vitiates public deliberation and constitutes a threat to the optimal functioning of full democracies.

From our Department of Sociology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and the Universidade da Coruña (UdC) we have developed a multi-agent simulation model that shows that face-to-face interactions between agents occupying different positions in the social hierarchy can be a determining factor in preference falsification dynamics and, consequently, can give rise to scenarios of pluralistic ignorance. The model also shows that, in such cases, citizens may eventually internalise the opinions expressed in public.

In short, a better understanding of how preference falsification dynamics work is essential to build stronger democracies where the public debate of ideas is freer and more rational.

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References

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