

LLYC  
IDEAS

# UNO



2024, no. 41

Navigating the age  
of polarization

## LLYC IDEAS

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# UNO

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## UNO

UNO is a publication by LLYC IDEAS designed for clients, industry professionals, journalists, and thought leaders. It features contributions from guest writers across Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and the United States, alongside LLYC's Partners and Executives, offering insights into communication-related topics.

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**Partner and Global COO at LLYC.** Luisa was named one of the most influential women in Spain by *Forbes* and *Yo Dona*. She was recognized as Woman of the Year in Communication and Corporate Services by the Stevie Awards for Women in Business and, for two consecutive years, was listed as one of the 50 most influential businesswomen in Latin America. Luisa is a member of the Institute of Directors, the Young Presidents Organization (YPO), and the Spanish Association of Female Executives and Directors (Eje&Con). With over 20 years of experience in communication consulting, she has led high-impact projects for multinational companies like Coca-Cola, GSK, ABInBev, and Telefónica. **[Spain]**



## **ALEJANDRO ROMERO**

**Partner and Global CEO at LLYC.** A financial, crisis, marketing, and corporate communication expert, Alejandro has managed some of the most prominent crisis communication projects in Latin America, such as Pacific Industrial Bank, Bavaria, and the shareholder dispute over the brewery Backus & Johnston. He has advised economic groups like Grupo Santo Domingo in Colombia, Grupo Romero in Peru, Grupo Luksic in Chile, Empresas Polar in Venezuela, and Grupo Financiero Uno in Central America. He has led three of Latam's ten most significant M&A deals, becoming one of the region's top specialists. **[Spain]**



## **ADRIANA CISNEROS**

**CEO of Cisneros Group and President of the Cisneros Foundation.** As a third-generation member of the Cisneros family, she plays a crucial role in expanding the business, focusing on new ventures. Adriana is the CEO of Tropicalia, a luxury tourism development in the Dominican Republic, and a leading advocate for corporate social responsibility through the Cisneros Foundation, which aims to improve education in Latin America. She also serves on MoMA PS1 board and Georgetown University's Latin America Board. A Columbia University Journalism graduate with a master's from New York University, Adriana also completed the Leadership Development Program at Harvard Business School. **[Venezuela]**

# THE TEAM



## MIKE HOUSTON

**CEO of LLYC US.** Mike oversees the firm's operations and its investor relations, public relations, and marketing strategies. With nearly twenty years of experience, he has provided guidance on matters related to mergers and acquisitions, sustainability, and shareholder engagement. Previously, he served as Vice President of Marketing at Amedica Corporation and led investor relations at Ancestry. Mike is a member of YPO and NIRI and was recognized as one of the top investor relations professionals under forty. [US]



## LUIS MILLER

**Senior Research Scientist at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).** Luis holds a PhD in Sociology and has worked at institutions such as the University of the Basque Country, the University of Oxford, and the Max Planck Society. He has been a visiting researcher at several international universities. A reference in experimental methodology in Sociology, Luis has explored the relationship between employment status, economic conditions, and people's preferences and values, with numerous notable publications. He has served as an advisor in the Office of Strategy and Prospective Studies of the Presidency and as the head of the Presidency at CSIC. [Spain]



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**Senior Global Innovation Director at LLYC.** Miguel is an expert telecommunications engineer with over 20 years of experience developing natural language processing solutions and AI technologies. At LLYC, he leads a team of experts focused on designing and deploying innovative AI-based solutions. He also heads the firm's Data Analytics specialty, working with large datasets. In 2008, he founded Acteo, a company that partnered with LLYC on innovative reputation measurement and data analysis projects. [Spain]



## YNDIRA MARÍN

**Chief Operating Officer at LLYC US.** Yndira graduated from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. She also attended executive education programs at ESIC Business & Marketing School in Madrid. With more than 17 years of experience in multinational communication consultancies, she has worked in both Miami and Washington, DC. In these roles, she has successfully managed public relations and public affairs strategies for clients in technology, aviation, and international organizations. At LLYC, she is responsible for developing and executing the firm's US market growth strategy and leading the integration of local acquisitions. [US]



## **PABLO GARCÍA-BERDOY**

### **Head of Public Affairs, Europe at LLYC.**

An expert in European political, institutional, and regulatory matters, Pablo has been a diplomat since 1987 and has focused much of his career on European affairs. He served as Director General for Foreign Policy for Europe (2002–2004), Spain's Ambassador to Romania and Moldova (2005–2009), Ambassador to Germany (2012–2016), and Permanent Representative to the EU (2016–2021). Since 2022, he has been a Principal Advisor on European Affairs at LLYC. **[Spain]**



## **CONCEIÇÃO ZAGALO**

### **Advisor at LLYC Portugal and President of the General Assembly of various NGOs.**

Conceição holds a degree in management, public relations, and marketing. She spent 38 years at IBM, where she held various management positions and served on the board of IBM Portugal. In 2004, she founded IBM's Women's Leadership Council and retired in 2011 after completing an assignment in Vietnam. Now focused on volunteering, she serves as president of several NGOs and is an MBA lecturer. Additionally, she is a founding member of GRACE and has participated in cooperative missions in Vietnam, Mozambique, and Cape Verde. Conceição has been recognized by Amnesty International for her commitment to social causes. **[Portugal]**



## **JUAN CARLOS GOZZER**

**Partner and CEO Latin America at LLYC.** A specialist in reputation management and communication strategies, Juan Carlos has coordinated numerous strategic positioning projects in Latin America over his 15 years with the company. He has led LLYC's operations in Brazil and the Southern Region, which includes Argentina and Chile. He holds a degree in Political Science, a specialization in International Information from the Complutense University of Madrid, and a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Bologna. **[Brazil]**



## **MARTIN BARON**

### **Journalist and Former Executive Editor of *The Washington Post*.**

Martin Baron is one of the world's most renowned journalists, celebrated for his role as editor of *The Boston Globe* (2001–2012), where he led the Pulitzer-winning *Spotlight* investigative team in 2003. This story was later adapted into the Oscar-winning film *Spotlight* in 2015. Martin began his journalism career in 1976 at *The Miami Herald* and worked at *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* before returning to *The Miami Herald* in 2000. He became executive editor of *The Washington Post* in 2013 and worked there until his retirement in 2021. Fluent in Spanish, he holds a BA and an MBA from Lehigh University. **[US]**

# THE TEAM



## GEMMA GUTIÉRREZ

**Managing Director of Marketing Solutions for LLYC Europe.** With over 16 years of experience at Ogilvy, where she held the position of General Manager, Gemma now leads LLYC's marketing strategy across Europe, focusing on developing both organic and collaborative growth opportunities. She holds a degree in Advertising and Public Relations from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and a Master's in Marketing Management from ESIC. She has also taught at EAE Business School and the UAB. [Europe]



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**Newsroom Secretary at *La Nación*.** Born in Buenos Aires in 1974, Martín joined *La Nación* in 1997, where he has held various roles, including writer for several sections, columnist, and political editor. From 2013 to 2017, he was a correspondent in Spain, based in Madrid. Since 2018, he has served as Newsroom Secretary, leading the Politics and Sports sections, while also contributing as a political columnist for *LN+*. He has shared his expertise as a professor at Universidad Torcuato Di Tella and in *La Nación's* Master's Program in Journalism. He holds a degree in Journalism from Universidad del Salvador and a postgraduate degree from the University of Miami. [Argentina]



## RAMÓN GONZÁLEZ FÉRRIZ

**Editorial Advisor at LLYC.** A regular contributor to *El Confidencial*, Ramón has also published *The Rupture: The Failure of a (Re) Generation* (Debate). [Spain]







LUISA GARCÍA

Partner and Global COO at LLYC / Spain

# NAVIGATING TODAY'S POLARIZATION

In recent years, societies have become more fragmented and polarized than ever before. It seems we are growing more different, our opinions more divergent, and it's becoming harder to find common ground, whether the issues are political or otherwise. This is a global and cross-cutting phenomenon, affecting the United States, much of Latin America, and nearly all of Europe. It's a trend that has a profound impact on business activities and the brands' reputation.

Many factors are driving this trend, notably the impact of technology, especially social media, the full consequences of which we have yet to understand. Global phenomena like economic inequality, the rise of feminism, the implications of climate change, new waves of migration, and two wars at Europe's doorstep also play a part.

**Polarization is here to stay. The best we can do is analyze it without excessive pessimism and figure out how to operate in this context.**

Regardless of its causes, polarization is here to stay. The best we can do is try to understand its roots and dynamics, interpret it without excessive pessimism, and figure out how to operate within this context while safeguarding the interests and values of our stakeholders. Additionally, as responsible citizens and organizations, we need to explore how to mitigate its worst consequences, especially since, in extreme cases, polarization threatens social cohesion and even democracy itself.

This issue of UNO Magazine tackles polarization from multiple angles. Contributors include LLYC consultants, clients, business leaders, politicians, renowned academics, and journalists. We've approached this complex phenomenon through a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, focusing on its far-reaching effects on contemporary society. A special emphasis has been placed on data, particularly the insights we gain from LLYC's technological tools, which leverage big data, artificial intelligence, and linguistic models, all stemming from active listening to digital conversations. These data points allow us to track major trends in consumer behavior, values, and politics, which form the backbone of many of our analyses.

**Thanks to our technology, we can detect major trends in public opinion around consumption, values, and politics—insights that form the foundation of much of our analysis.**

Some of the articles focus on the current delicate situation, particularly in a year like 2024, when a record number of citizens worldwide—from the European Union to Mexico, from several Spanish autonomous communities to India—have had the opportunity to choose their leaders. The November U.S. presidential election, a globally significant event, has culminated with Donald Trump being re-elected as President. However, polarization goes far beyond institutional politics. As many articles underscore, individuals and companies must also learn how to navigate this polarized environment. They need to cultivate their reputation, communicate their messages

and beliefs effectively, and care for their talent. They must recognize that the growing disconnect between social groups, sometimes tragically at odds, is a new reality. This often leads to legitimate questioning but also breeds hostility online and fuels smear campaigns. Many brands have, intentionally or not, taken on political connotations, forcing them to position themselves on controversial issues carefully. Consumers now expect not just quality products and services at fair prices but also that these offerings reflect their beliefs and lifestyles.

The key is to understand this new social and communication landscape and to prepare for it. That's the goal of this magazine, which brings together diverse viewpoints and disciplines. The insights shared in these pages shed light on the current situation, providing professionals with the tools they need to thrive—whether in marketing, talent management, crisis and reputation management, healthcare, or public affairs—in a polarized world we must all learn to navigate.

**It's about understanding the new social and communication landscape and preparing to face it. That's the goal of this magazine, which brings together a wide range of perspectives and disciplines.**



**ALEJANDRO ROMERO**

Partner and Global CEO at LLYC / Spain

**ADRIANA CISNEROS**

CEO of Cisneros Group and President of the Cisneros Foundation / Venezuela

**O**ver the past fifty years, Gustavo Cisneros was among the most influential business figures in the Hispanic world and the United States. He inherited a group of businesses in Venezuela from his father, and his optimism and insatiable curiosity led him to expand across Latin America, the U.S., and much of Europe. Along the way, he faced various challenges, including political obstacles brought on by the rise of populism in his home country. Yet despite these difficulties, he achieved his goal: creating a robust company spanning various sectors—ranging from beverage bottling to television and tourism—while simultaneously making a positive impact on society through investments in sustainability, education, and the arts.

Cisneros passed away on December 29, 2023. In the years prior, he had worked closely with José Antonio Llorente, founder of LLYC, and the two had become friends. When Forbes requested Llorente to write an obituary for his friend, he delivered an emotional and memorable piece. “Gustavo was no ordinary person—far from it,” Llorente wrote. “He had a certain magic that made him compelling, persuasive, funny, a born salesman, and inspiring in whatever challenges lay ahead,” and many of these qualities could also be attributed to Llorente.

Not many people know that Llorente needed assistance to write the article because he was already seriously ill when Gustavo passed. This tribute to his friend was one of his final acts. He

# LESSONS GUSTAVO CISNEROS AND JOSÉ ANTONIO LLORENTE LEFT WITH US

passed away on December 31, and that same day, Forbes published his touching piece.

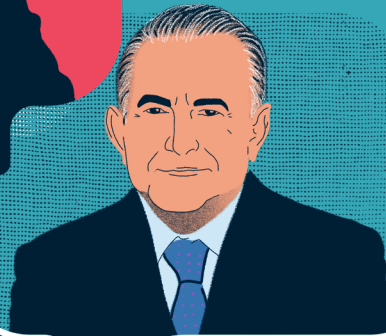
**In this open and moving conversation, Adriana Cisneros and Alejandro Romero reflect on the friendship of their predecessors and the lessons they learned about leadership and social impact.**

Adriana Cisneros succeeded her father as CEO of Grupo Cisneros, and Alejandro Romero is now the Global CEO of LLYC. Both worked closely with their predecessors, getting to know them personally and professionally. In this heartfelt conversation, Adriana and Alejandro reflect on their friendship, the traits that made their predecessors the exceptional leaders they were, and the importance they placed on the social impact of their companies.

This issue of UNO Magazine highlights the social polarization of our times, focusing on a common trait shared by the two men: their ability to listen to diverse perspectives and their commitment to fostering connections between people and nations.

## LEADING WITH CURIOSITY

**Adriana:** It’s incredible that these two men, at their age, decided to become best friends. It says a lot about the kind of people they were



and what they had in common. They were both extremely curious, always eager to understand different viewpoints. I believe this enthusiasm fueled their friendship, which was sometimes dynamic and strategic but mostly light and fun. Their willingness to embrace new possibilities shaped their leadership. My father was all about curiosity and optimism, always wanting to stay on top of everything happening at any moment. But José Antonio was the same way. They were the youngest “old men” I have ever known.

Alejandro and I used to laugh because we were always exhausted after working with them. They were the first to arrive at meetings and the last to leave the party, constantly coming up with ten times more ideas than we did. We always joked that it was up to us to manage the flood of ideas coming from my dad and José Antonio. And that’s partly how we inherited their friendship.

**Alejandro:** José Antonio and Don Gustavo were modern men. Don Gustavo was always up to date on what was happening on Facebook or how X worked. On the other hand, José Antonio had developed a full-bodied digital persona. However, considering the theme of this issue, it is important to emphasize their capacity to engage with both sides of any debate, even the extremes. Don Gustavo could meet with Barack Obama and George Bush, Donald Trump and Bill Clinton, Felipe González and José María Aznar. The best way to avoid polarization is by engaging in dialogue and understanding both sides. I learned something similar from José Antonio. Few people can listen and avoid polarization; you need to bring both extremes together. Don Gustavo and José Antonio’s homes were places where both sides could coexist. Virtue lies in finding balance, and balance represents the middle ground. I’ve learned to apply that to my leadership style.

**Adriana:** Empathy was also crucial for my father. He could land in any country, make connections, set up businesses, and understand the market.

I suppose that the ability to travel the world and feel at home anywhere was part of José Antonio’s success, too. Maybe it was a genetic trait—my grandfather could have settled for being the king of Venezuela, but he thought Venezuela was too small. That mindset became part of the company’s DNA. We’ve never felt restricted by borders.

But the issue of borders is complex. Sometimes, American partners or friends call me to ask for advice on expanding their business in Latin America. That’s a mistake. It’s like if I said I wanted to expand into Africa. Sure, you can have a global strategy, but it has to be hyperlocal at the same time—both mindsets need to go hand in hand. I think much of our international success came from understanding that.

**To avoid polarization, we need the ability to bring together both extremes. Both sides were welcome in the homes of don Gustavo and José Antonio. Virtue lies in balance.**

**Alejandro:** Don Gustavo had a way of making the world seem smaller—you could have breakfast in New York, lunch in Panama, and dinner in Buenos Aires. I remember the launch of his first book; he held two press conferences a day, each in a different country. Being a global citizen fueled his business vision. José Antonio learned this partly from Don Gustavo. He quickly realized that Latin America was the natural area of expansion for the company because they spoke Spanish there. That didn’t mean it was easy—on the contrary. However, it was the most straightforward option for a Hispanic communications company. José Antonio also had a deep commitment to Europe and championed the idea of Europe. Both men were not constrained by borders and believed that inclusion, diversity, and multiculturalism were essential for their business success.

## SOCIAL COMMITMENT

**Adriana:** In my father's case, their social commitment was tied to a particular idea of citizenship. It was a sophisticated concept for him, not something he did for positioning reasons. And he was lucky to have my mom, Patricia Phelps, or Patty, as his intellectual partner. His focus was always on education, but it extended to other areas too. When we enter a country to set up an operation, we have a different sense of time than many other companies. We usually stay in a country for a long time. And when that happens, when you wake up day after day, you always have the same neighbors. When you think about it that way, you're willing to invest in your neighbors' well-being and behave more responsibly.

For example, the Cisneros Foundation has been operating in the Dominican Republic for 15 years. Still, I only recently started building the Four Seasons hotel as part of Tropicalia, a real estate development in Playa Esmeralda. When we secured financing from the Inter-American Bank, not only did they give us the highest social score in the bank's history, but they didn't have any recommendations for improving our social investment practices, which had never happened before. All the businesses we've built are at least medium-term ventures, which has forced us to reconsider our role and makes a huge difference. We're the opposite of mercenaries.

**Alejandro:** I'd like to highlight initiatives like your @Clase channel, the first educational television channel, or Miss Venezuela. There's probably nothing more frivolous in today's society than a beauty pageant, but you turned it into something aspirational. It became a platform that helped people, often from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, to become artists, presenters, or leaders in their communities. The company has always combined social impact with business.

José Antonio was also highly attuned to these same worlds, which he shared with Don Gustavo. They both wrote books, collected art, and opened their collections to the public for cultural impact. You learn a lot from that—not because they sit down to teach you, but because you see the impact of those actions.

**Gustavo Cisneros' social involvement stemmed from a particular vision of citizenship. It wasn't something anyone told him to do for the sake of positioning.**

**Adriana:** My father insisted that I become his successor, which I thought was a terrible idea at first. In the end, we agreed to have a structured conversation over three years so I could make the decision, and when I finally did, I had only one condition: I also had to run the Foundation. I literally told him, "Half of my heart beats for business, and the other half for social investment." He didn't like it because he knew the Foundation's work was immense and complex, but he had no choice. It was one of the best conditions I've ever set in my life.

## INNOVATION

**Alejandro:** Earlier, I mentioned how modern they both were. During the tribute to José Antonio, someone described him as a Renaissance man. I coupled that idea with constant innovation. I remember a time when someone in their twenties or thirties complained about the launch of a new social network, Threads, to compete with X. "Do we really need the stress of another platform?" they asked. José Antonio replied, "Give it love." Here was a 63-year-old man, clearly not a digital

native, telling a digital native to give a new platform attention in case it became more important than X in the future. He always shared the mindset of “Welcome to today’s world.” You had to try everything.

**Adriana:** For a longstanding company, innovation poses a complex challenge: maintaining the discipline to innovate constantly. It’s tough. People get comfortable, and leaders age. We’ve always been super innovative, except for 15 years. When Hugo Chávez won the presidency, he declared my father the number one enemy of the state. Chávez would go on his infamous broadcasts and attack us daily as a group, as a family, and him personally. My father received daily death threats.

That’s when the decision was made to move the whole group to the U.S. and set up in Miami. The transition was extremely difficult. We had to build production studios in Florida to fulfill our contract with Univision. We brought along our executives, and we had to find offices, schools for their children, and so on. At this point, people started talking to me. I realized that the group had been so focused on survival that innovation had been wholly neglected. It’s very hard to try to survive and innovate at the same time. So, once we were settled in the U.S. and had managed to survive, I realized we had to start innovating again. That’s when the digital revolution came in.

What was interesting about my arrival wasn’t that I was particularly smart or innovative but that I represented a fresh perspective. I said, “All the TV channels are doing this. There are different opportunities. We need to change our mindset.” And there was openness to that. We became innovators once again.

## STRATEGIC OPTIMISM

**Adriana:** Both José Antonio and my dad were optimistic people. The world is divided between those who are and those who aren’t. Their optimism made my dad get up every day thinking, “There’s a new person I can meet, a new angle we can take, a way to reconcile these ideas.” It was an optimism that could even be excessive at times. Some people said his optimism was contagious, but it was sometimes overwhelming for me. That’s where this unbeatable energy and desire to keep doing things came from.

**Innovation is one of the most complex challenges for any long-standing company—keeping the drive to continue innovating is no easy feat.**

**Alejandro:** Optimism also had a strategic side. From both of them, I learned that relationship management is part of business. Understanding both extremes is key to being successful. For example, Don Gustavo always made you feel like the most important guest in his house. José Antonio did something similar: if you liked a certain wine, you’d arrive at his house, and he’d have that wine there, picked just for you. It was this ability to create emotional bonds. And, of course, that had professional implications: it allowed them to push you to go the extra mile.

**Adriana:** You’d go the extra mile for them, but then they’d demand two more.

**Alejandro:** Absolutely. That’s exactly how it was.

**Adriana:** Even if they were happy, they’d still give you the sense that you owed them just a little more. It was part of their work dynamic.

**Alejandro:** You could do an excellent job, and they'd still say, "It could have been better." But it was that emotional connection that made you give more. That's why I say their optimism and curiosity also had a strategic element. They'd make you feel like the most important person at the table, but they'd also ask for more. That was a trait both of them shared.

## **LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF POLARIZATION**

**Adriana:** The world has always been polarized. But it's indeed affecting our generation as well. However, when I started working with my dad, he always made me understand the other side of the equation. He always kept me from staying comfortable with what I knew. He always told me it was crucial to understand the alternative perspective, where that other viewpoint came from, and how our competitors saw things. I want to maintain the discipline to always listen to the other side of the equation.

**Understanding where that other point of view came from and how competitors saw things was critical. I hope to keep the discipline of always wanting to hear the other side of the equation.**

**Alejandro:** We must learn from leaders like Don Gustavo and José Antonio. But you also have to develop your own voice. I've seen how Adriana has done that. I've learned from her how she's found her own voice and carved out her own space. And yes, now social polarization is more visible because of social media. We live in the dictatorship of algorithms. They give you what you want to see, multiply it by a hundred, and that's all you see. That's why it's important to learn from people like them, to read both sides and then form your own opinion. Don Gustavo invited all kinds of people to his home—intellectuals, journalists—so he could listen to them and then form his own views. There's something I've never told Adriana. She's shared stories and anecdotes with me that have made me envy her childhood, the way she was surrounded by artists and writers. José Antonio also surrounded himself with those kinds of people. We've been fortunate to have been part of many of these thought forums, understanding that it's essential to be able to listen, understand one another, and build consensus.





**MIKE HOUSTON**  
CEO of LLYC US / US

**LUISA GARCÍA**  
Partner and Global COO at LLYC / Spain

**D**iversity policies have a long history in the U.S., dating back to at least the 1960s when the term “affirmative action” became widely used to advocate for the labor and educational rights of ethnic minorities. Although these policies gained momentum, they were always controversial and have been at the center of fierce political debates between supporters and critics for decades. However, starting with Obama’s presidency, these policies—which have continued to evolve and are now commonly referred to by the acronym DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion)—experienced a significant surge, with numerous organizations adopting them as part of their values and communication strategies.

However, the polarization surrounding this framework has become more apparent, partly due to the influence of digital conversations in the public sphere during the same period. The effects of this situation are clearly visible in the various decisions that many organizations are currently making. For instance, in 2024, *The New York Times* devoted notable attention to its DEI framework, with its core narrative being that DEI is increasingly under scrutiny. As opposition grows louder and several legal challenges emerge, as the newspaper reported in January, many corporate leaders are scaling back their plans or downplaying them. In some cases, as reported in its business section, many companies include these practices but have stopped calling them DEI, opting for more neutral terms such as “culture.” That summer, it was reported that Harvard and MIT—two of the country’s leading universities—would no

# POLARIZATION REGARDING DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

longer require new faculty to explicitly affirm their commitment to diversity. “Is this the end of mandatory DEI statements?” the newspaper pondered.

**Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies have become increasingly important as more organizations adopt them as fundamental to their values and messaging.**

Of course, many businesses and educational institutions continue to operate under the DEI framework, calling it by name and proudly displaying their commitment. But the buzz generated by these reports—especially coming from a newspaper that has been a vocal supporter of diversity over the past decade—has drawn attention. Is the widespread survival of this commitment in jeopardy? Is the controversy surrounding it really that intense?

## WHAT DIGITAL CONVERSATIONS REVEAL

Listening to and analyzing digital conversations is one of the most effective ways to capture public opinion dynamics and the spread of ideas in society. LLYC has developed proprietary technology based on big data and artificial intelligence that processes conversations around specific topics, tracks trends, and assesses their volume. This tool was employed to explore these very questions.



In 2023, the most recent full year of available data, 20 million DEI-related messages were posted in the United States. To put this in perspective, this is six times the volume of one of the most polarizing topics in the U.S.: gun control. It happened during a year in which hate speech grew by 35%, particularly in traditionally progressive discourse spaces, such as equality, diversity, and the environment. Regarding the latter, hate speech grew by more than 65% in a single year.

A more detailed analysis of digital conversations reveals the degree of polarization that DEI policies have generated recently. About 37% of conversations around diversity in the U.S. are highly polarized. On one end of the spectrum, conservatives (21%) accuse DEI policies of corrupting education and falsely claim that drag performers and transgender people are promoting pornographic content in schools. On the progressive side (16%), there is condemnation of homophobic individuals for physically attacking people based on their sexual orientation.

## IMPACT ON BUSINESS

This polarized—and often aggressive—digital conversation surrounding the DEI framework explains, at least in part, the decisions made by companies and other organizations as they navigate a particularly challenging moment, trying to fulfill their purpose while protecting their reputations. There are already major case studies on how companies like Walmart and Disney have made gradual transitions to adapt to the environment, which will be explored in a forthcoming report by LLYC. But there have also been some notable failures.

In any case, the polarization surrounding this issue is here to stay—just as it will remain for many other issues that impact the operations of all businesses. As noted in *The Hidden Drug*, an LLYC report analyzing digital conversations in 12 countries on controversial topics, polarization has “become a structural feature of our entire public space.” Organizations must be aware of the risks associated with this, particularly in the case of DEI principles, which many consider as a defining characteristic and a matter of basic justice.

**Polarization significantly impacts our public sphere. Organizations must recognize the risks associated with it, particularly regarding DEI principles.**



**LUIS MILLER**

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## WHAT IS POLARIZATION AND WHY IT MATTERS

**T**his year's World Economic Forum Global Risks Report identified societal polarization as the third biggest short-term global risk. Societal polarization, a complex issue with interconnected causes and effects, refers to ideological and cultural divides that lead to declining social stability, constant gridlock in public decision-making, economic disruptions, and increasing political polarization. It is also closely linked to other societal risks, such as misinformation, internal violence, and the erosion of human rights. Additionally, divided societies are less equipped to tackle other global challenges, such as ecological transitions, economic, demographic, or digital transformations, and the spread of infectious diseases—as we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Societal polarization arises from two interconnected but separate social processes. The first occurs in the political sphere and involves the division and radicalization of political elites and their supporters. Since the beginning of the century, ideological disparities among individuals aligned with different political parties have consistently increased in Spain.

According to the recent NORPOL study by the Institute of Public Goods and Policies (CSIC), the most divisive topics among Spaniards are gender equality measures and national identity.

Furthermore, the political issues that generate consensus between people who identify with left- and right-wing parties are very different. The left largely agrees on matters such as the right of same-sex couples to adopt, access to abortion, or rent price regulation. On the right, there is

more agreement on feelings of national pride and the belief that immigrants should integrate into Spanish culture. These political positions are rooted in evolving values, a phenomenon observed in other societies as well. According to studies by the Center for Sociological Research, over the past 15 years, a significant gap has emerged in religious sentiment and economic and social values between citizens of differing ideologies.

The second process originates within the social sphere itself. It refers to the increasing fragmentation into different ideological communities and social groups.

**Divided societies are less equipped to tackle other global challenges like the ecological transition or economic, demographic, and digital transformations.**

Over the last two decades, social, demographic, and geographic differentiation among voters of various parties has intensified. We're all living in our own bubbles, surrounded by people like us who share similar thoughts. The divide between individuals and groups with different political affinities extends beyond ideology or emotions and into areas like lifestyle, tastes, and residential choices.

In Spain, as in many neighboring countries, urban lifestyles, organic food consumption, and cycling are associated with progressive ideology, while traditional activities such as hunting or living in new suburbs around major cities are linked to conservative ideologies.

The growing ideological divides and increasing homogeneity of our social environments have intensified feelings of rejection toward those who think or live differently from us. For example, individuals with progressive beliefs strongly oppose climate change deniers, while feminism has generated negative sentiment among conservatives.

As we can see, societal polarization goes far beyond political polarization. The primary risk we face is that societal divisions may reach a tipping point where even common threats cannot foster shared interests among different groups. This would devastate policy development related to climate change or migration.

The problem in most modern democracies is that the combination of political polarization and social fragmentation increases the risk of democratic societies disintegrating or collapsing as we know them. The impact of political and social polarization on our everyday lives is significant, even without a complete breakdown. Extreme political views can affect our professional lives, such as when choosing teammates, and our personal lives, influencing who we socialize with outside of work. Additionally, a lack of ideological diversity threatens worker well-being and productivity and undermines company decision-making processes.

The concept of polarization is widely debated politically and socially despite its widespread prevalence. The term “asymmetric polarization” has been used to suggest that divisive attitudes and tension are produced only by one side of the political spectrum, mainly, the right.

**The main risk is that social division could reach a tipping point, where even activating shared interests will not be enough to unite different groups.**

What should indeed concern us is not political polarization, which can sometimes be healthy, but the kind that seeps into every aspect of society, fracturing shared spaces and creating communities divided by beliefs, values, and lifestyles.



MIGUEL LUCAS

Global Innovation Lead de LLYC / Spain

## DIGITAL CONVERSATION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES

In a globally fragmented landscape, political polarization has emerged as one of the greatest threats to modern democracies. This phenomenon erodes trust in institutions, distorts public discourse, and jeopardizes the stability of electoral processes. Far from being a minor or temporary issue, severe polarization undermines the fundamental principles that keep democracies running.

Among its most damaging effects, legislative bodies are reduced to rubber-stamp entities, executive powers grow at the expense of other checks and balances, and attacks on the independence of the judiciary intensify. Polarization undermines essential norms, such as accepting electoral defeat, which are crucial for the coexistence of political diversity.

Today, polarization has been accelerated by the rise of two high-impact technologies: digital social networks and artificial intelligence. Both have profoundly changed how public debate unfolds and how information is manipulated.

However, while these tools have gained prominence over the last few decades, their role in polarization is more about amplification than origin. Various studies confirm that political polarization has much deeper roots than social media. A study by the University of Cambridge titled *From Backwaters to Major Policymakers: Policy Polarization in the States, 1970–2014*<sup>1</sup> suggests that polarization in the U.S. began intensifying in the 1970s, with a sharp rise starting around 2000—well before platforms like Facebook or X gained significant influence.

Even so, it's undeniable that social media has sped up this process. Digital platforms have transformed how citizens get informed, engage in debate, and make political decisions.

The algorithms driving these platforms aren't designed to promote moderation or constructive dialogue. Instead, they prioritize content that generates more interaction, which often means amplifying more polarizing, emotionally charged messages. A recent study by LLYC, *The Hidden Drug*<sup>2</sup>, based on an analysis of over 600 million messages, confirmed that polarization in social conversations across Latin America increased by 39% between 2018 and 2022. Thus, social networks have become amplifiers of polarization, pushing people towards more extreme positions and stifling democratic conversation.

The role of social media has evolved over time. In the first half of the 2010s, open platforms like Facebook and X dominated the public and political space, with notable cases like the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2016. This scandal revealed how the misuse of personal data harvested from Facebook was leveraged to profile over 87 million people and used in the election campaigns of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum. This episode demonstrated the immense power that open social networks could wield over democratic processes.

In recent years, the landscape has changed drastically. Closed platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram have taken over the political and social conversation. According to Statista, as of April 2024, WhatsApp had nearly 3 billion users<sup>3</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/from-backwaters-to-major-policymakers-policy-polarization-in-the-states-19702014/51DD7B022E358A99333447A6E2BA7B63>

<sup>2</sup> <https://thehiddendrug.llorenteycuenca.com/>

marking a 50% increase since early 2020. This growth has changed the playing field. Instead of happening on open, transparent networks where content can be monitored, much of the political conversation has moved to closed, obscure environments where misinformation can spread unchecked.

In these more closed spaces, radicalization can grow within small, intimate circles, making it harder to detect and control. Political radicalization that used to occur openly on platforms like X is now incubated in private spaces like WhatsApp, where it can jump back into more visible networks. This dynamic has played a key role in recent political upheavals, such as the Capitol attack in January 2021, where it was revealed that much of the planning occurred through platforms like WhatsApp and Parler, a niche network that also promotes privacy and closed communication.

Given the scale of these challenges, judicial systems and regulators in several countries have begun to intervene. A clear example is Judge Alexandre de Moraes in Brazil, who, on August 30, 2024, ordered the immediate suspension of X (formerly Twitter) due to the platform's refusal to remove six user profiles linked to former president Jair Bolsonaro. Elon Musk, the CEO of X, refused to comply with the order, calling the judge a "dictator." This standoff highlights the growing importance of content moderation and the tricky balance between free speech and the fight against misinformation.

Another notable case is the August 24, 2024, arrest of Pavel Durov, founder and CEO of Telegram, in France. Durov was detained for allegedly failing to cooperate with French authorities and for not implementing effective moderation measures on his platform, which allowed the proliferation of illegal activities and harmful content. These cases reflect how the impact of social networks on electoral processes and political polarization

has forced judicial systems to take a hard stance despite the complex tensions between regulation and freedom of expression.

However, local actions have limited reach when dealing with a phenomenon that is, by nature, global and cross-border. Disinformation operations don't respect national borders, and digital capitalism has created an international economy of disinformation.

### **In recent years, the landscape has shifted dramatically. Closed platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram have taken over political and social conversations.**

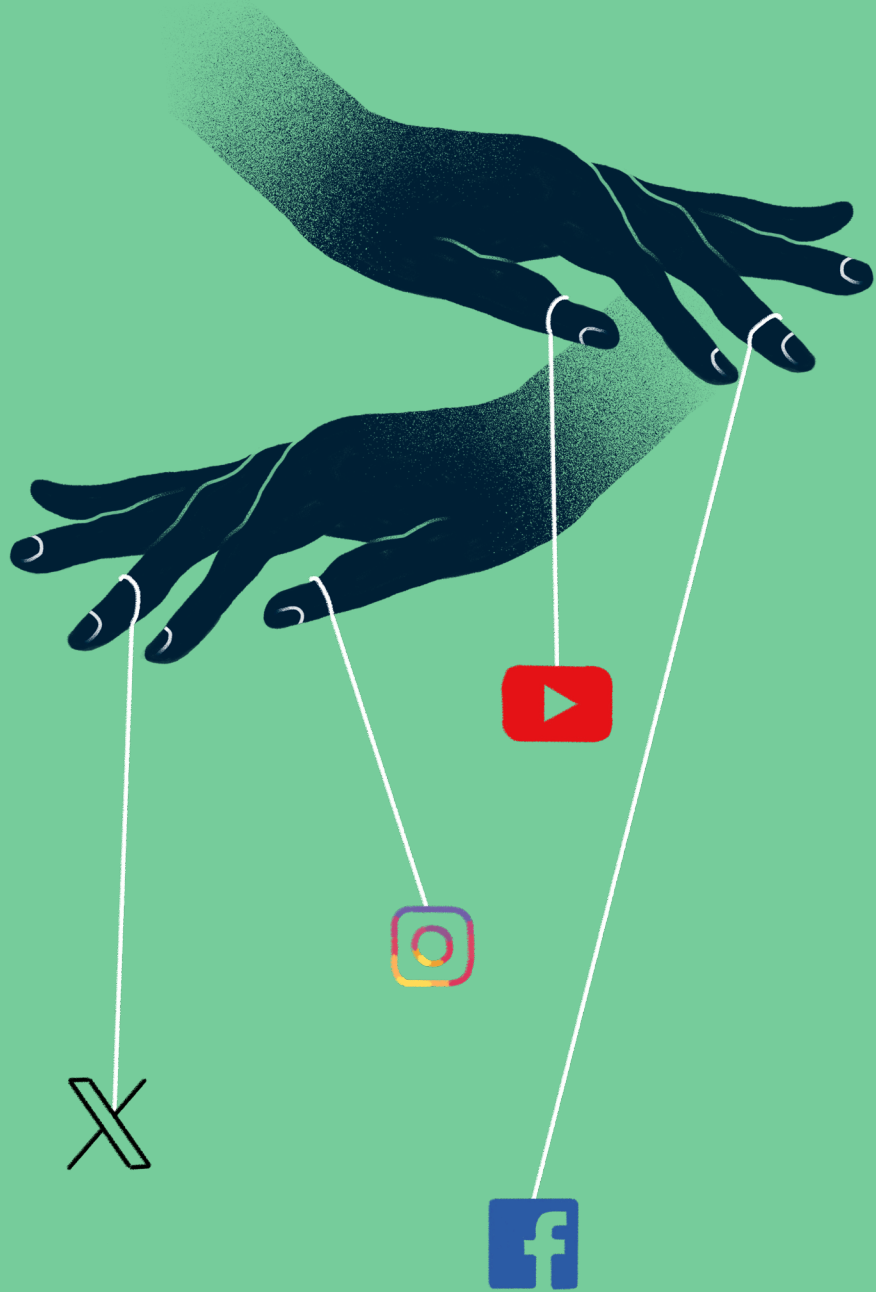
A study by Qurium<sup>4</sup> revealed that, in 2022, Iranian activists from the *#MeToo* movement were targeted by disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Pakistani digital marketing firms. These transnational operations show how bad actors can hire disinformation services in countries with looser regulations, making the fight against this phenomenon even more challenging.

In this context, artificial intelligence (AI) can be a key tool in exacerbating political polarization. AI plays a triple role: first, AI-driven recommendation algorithms determine what content users see, amplifying the most engaging material—and often the most polarizing. Second, micro-targeting based on personal data allows political actors to target specific population segments with tailored messages that can manipulate voting behavior. Finally, generative AI has enabled disinformation on an unprecedented scale. Deepfakes—synthetic videos and audio—have evolved from a technological curiosity to powerful tools for manipulating audiences.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1306022/whatsapp-global-unique-users/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.qurium.org/alerts/iran/weaponizing-instagram-against-the-iranian-metoo/>





A recent case, exposed in 2023, involved a network of Iranian accounts dismantled by OpenAI as part of a disinformation campaign surrounding the U.S. presidential elections. This network used AI to generate fake content, including text, images, and videos designed to influence public opinion. Generative AI, with its ability to create synthetic content nearly indistinguishable from reality, poses a new challenge to electoral integrity.

The issue of deepfakes is especially concerning. In 2024, Grok, X's AI, was accused of generating hyper-realistic images of politicians like Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, and Joe Biden, depicting them in compromising situations that never actually occurred. These images not only raised alarms among fact-checking services but also underscored how difficult it is to detect and stop the spread of disinformation in today's environment.

A report by the Stanford Internet Observatory<sup>5</sup>, in collaboration with Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology, published in early 2023, warned about the impact of large language models (LLMs) on disinformation. These models allow bad actors to design and execute campaigns at low cost and on an unprecedented scale. The report emphasizes that LLMs' ability to generate persuasive, long-form content that's hard to identify as malicious poses a growing risk to democracies.

In terms of regulation, most countries are ill-prepared to face these challenges. While some nations, like China, have attempted to introduce regulations for AI-generated content—such as requiring watermarks on synthetic videos—most countries lack robust legal frameworks to tackle this issue. Moreover, there is a risk that regulations could be misused to control information rather than protect the integrity of democratic processes.

The combination of political polarization, disinformation, and the growing power of AI poses an existential threat to electoral processes and modern democracies. As these technologies evolve, governments and societies must find ways to mitigate their corrosive effects without undermining freedom of expression. The question remains whether we will be able to regulate these tools in time to protect the integrity of our democracies or if we are destined for an era of manipulated elections, extreme polarization, and institutional distrust.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/publication/generative-language-models-and-automated-influence-operations-emerging-threats-and>



**YNDIRA MARÍN**

Chief Operating Officer at LLYC US / US

# POLITICAL POLARIZATION & THE STAKES OF THE 2024 U.S. ELECTION

**T**he 2024 U.S. election season has shone a spotlight on a democracy suffering from widening ideological rifts. While political polarization is not new to American politics, the Pew Research Center has tracked a stark rise in conflict between opposing parties since 1994. Today's current political divide has escalated into a divisive force that threatens to erode the social fabric behind one of the world's most important modern democracies. This chasm between the two major political parties has transcended policy disagreements and evolved into an existential clash over the American identity and the boundaries of government responsibility. Nowhere is this fracture more evident than in the discourse surrounding three pivotal voter issues: The economy, women's health, and immigration.

## THE ECONOMY

Economic concerns consistently shape election years, and 2024 is no exception. In the wake of 2022's inflation spike, 81% of registered voters listed the economy as the most decisive factor in their voting decisions. However, the political polarization surrounding economic issues in the United States underscores a deeper philosophical conflict over how the nation views individual versus collective responsibility.

Former President Trump's economic agenda focuses on raising tariffs as high as 20% on imports, rising to as much as 60% from China, as well as widespread tax cuts and deregulation across sectors – all choices that reflect his vision for limited government responsibility. This resonates with a voter pool whose primary concerns about inflation and job security are intertwined with a broader skepticism of state intervention in the market and a belief that America's economic prosperity will be best achieved through governmental deregulation.

On the other side, Vice President Harris describes her economic outlook as an "opportunity economy." She frames policies aimed at strengthening Social Security and Medicare, increasing the minimum wage, and investing in social infrastructure as equalizers of opportunity, offering citizens more chances to reach their potential. This "opportunity" approach to economic governance tends to attract voters who view government support as a necessary corrective to systemic inequalities and the excesses of capitalism.

This approach could also have translated into substantial economic growth, as recently seen in the U.S. Latina population. In fact, Bank of America's inaugural U.S. Latina GDP Report found that U.S. Latinas contributed \$1.3 trillion to GDP in 2021. Harris's agenda has the chance to directly impact this population, where added support could have driven this number even higher.

## WOMEN'S HEALTH

The ideological divide over the role of government is further represented by the issue of women's health, particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* – a key turning point in the nation's political climate. The verdict has reignited debates over reproductive rights and drawn sharp political lines regarding state regulation of personal morality and bodily autonomy, especially as four of the five justices who voted to overturn it are men, making decisions about issues that will bear them no consequences. When a woman is denied access to healthcare and contraception, it becomes more than just a policy stance – it is a direct attack on her ability to fully participate in society, chart her own future, and succeed in equal measure to her male counterparts. Restricting access to abortion and reproductive healthcare can lead to an increased number of women leaving the workforce, potentially costing the U.S. trillions in GDP.

While over 62% of the American population disagrees with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, partisan differences have widened significantly since the decision. With 80% of Democratic-leaning voters disapproving and 70% of Republican-leaning voters approving, these opposing beliefs - shaped by differing religious values and views on government interference in personal choices - have significantly influenced the 2024 election and the future of women's health in the United States.

Despite conflicting messages on abortion, a Trump administration will likely pursue policies to further restrict access to reproductive healthcare, potentially dismantling federal protections and cutting funding for state-run health programs. Conversely, a Harris administration would have likely expanded these services, framing reproductive rights as a basic human right and a key component of social justice. This divergence reflects not only a fundamental clash over the values that guide American society, but ongoing tensions over the role of government in personal and public decision-making.

## IMMIGRATION

However, when it comes to immigration issues, political polarization goes beyond opinions on state interference to touch on broader anxieties about demographic change and national identity. Since Trump's first presidential campaign in 2016, immigration was narratively framed as a "threat to American-ism." Stricter border controls and limited pathways to citizenship have been presented to voters as the only solution for a nation strained by public resources. While this perspective is often displayed as a way to protect jobs, it becomes more polarizing when it reflects an underlying fear of losing an "American identity."

In contrast, Harris's campaign frames immigration as a vital contributor to national economic and cultural innovation. It particularly emphasizes the economic benefits of Latino immigrants, a population that starts new businesses at double the rate of U.S.-born citizens and funnels an additional \$800 billion into the U.S. economy each year.

This is especially relevant right now, as the year's recent political turmoil in Venezuela will likely spur another wave of immigration. Over the past decade, the number of Venezuelan immigrants residing in the U.S. for five years or less surged from 40,000 in 2010 to 215,000 by 2021. This is a significant figure, as Venezuelan immigrants are the most likely among Latino groups to hold a bachelor's degree, positioning them to make significant economic contributions upon arrival. For Democratic-leaning voters, supporting this influx of talent aligns with improved economic stimulus and a reaffirmation of America's historic commitment to diversity and inclusion.

## WHAT IT MEANS

Once the 2024 election results are settled. The implications of political polarization, as demonstrated across these opposing opinions on three key voter issues, extend far beyond the final electoral outcome. These differences regarding governance and national identity are changing how Americans see their neighbors, their institutions, and the legitimacy of the democratic process. As political scientist Lynn Vavreck commented, the average American voter has become "calcified;" polarization is not just causing a basic divide, but fully binding individuals within their own ideological spaces. Ultimately, this means that the 2024 election will be less about persuading undecided voters and more about mobilizing an entrenched base, raising the stakes for both parties.



PABLO GARCÍA-BERDOY

Head of Public Affairs, Europe at LLYC / Spain

## EUROPEAN POLARIZATION: SPECIFIC FACETS OF A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

**T**he public's anticipation and engagement leading up to the European Parliament elections was at a fever pitch. People were worried about the future direction of European policies and the overall European integration project.

The traditional coalition of conservative, social-democratic, and liberal parties that has been in charge of Europe seemed to be at risk. There was a decision to be made about whether to include the Greens in the coalition or to expand the support base by reaching out to the far-right, and it seemed like a make-or-break situation.

The election results, however, were better than expected. While anti-government sentiment ran high in some countries like France and Germany, the major European political families held their ground. The conservatives performed well, and the social democrats broke even, while the losses for liberals and Greens weren't severe enough to destabilize the pro-European majority.

What matters most here isn't the outcome but the root cause: the unique characteristics of populism and polarization within the European sociopolitical context. This isn't just about geography but about Europe as a political project in flux, balancing between a traditional nation-state model and a supranational entity with federal characteristics.

This evolving model explains some populist tensions in Europe and how they manifest as social polarization.

The dilution of national sovereignty into a larger political project has created resistance that national leaders have not handled well. As nation-

states struggle to respond to global challenges, a supranational model like the EU seems advantageous. Yet those same leaders often blame Europe for decisions they don't want to take responsibility for, using the EU as a scapegoat, which fuels anti-European polarization, particularly in countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which only recently regained political autonomy after the fall of the Soviet Union.

European institutions, such as the Commission and Parliament, play a part in this division. Sometimes, they appear disconnected from national discussions and may create laws without taking into account the perspectives of all member states or their various communities. However, striving for common rules and regulations across the European Union inevitably leaves some viewpoints out.

**The dilution of the nation-state within an integrative political project generates resistance that national leaders have failed to manage effectively.**

The ongoing debate between "Yes to Europe, No to Europe" is further complicated by the absence of a unified European public discourse. Instead of a cohesive European public opinion, discussions are often dominated by national and local issues, overlooking the broader global context. The lack of interest shown by many media outlets and political leaders in European matters adds to a feeling of irrelevance among the public. For some, the frequent meetings in Brussels and the

spectacle of European Council gatherings appear to be much ado about nothing.

We witnessed this firsthand at LLYC while analyzing social media discussions prior to the most recent European Parliament elections. Our study<sup>1</sup> revealed that the loudest voices in the debate often came from those most opposed to European integration. These nationalist groups, from various political spectrums, dominated discussions in “anger zones” about issues important to their compatriots. During elections, this anger can translate into a magnified protest vote driven by the perceived irrelevance of European electoral politics—a direct consequence of the lack of attention to European-level democratic representation.

The European Union often faces a delicate challenge: being seen as a layer of values imposed on national identities. This issue is deeply rooted in the structure of the EU itself. If we think of Europe as a community built on shared values, the balance between individual national identities and collective European ideals becomes worth protecting. Nevertheless, pushing too hard to magnify what we have in common can trigger resistance. On the other hand, if we undervalue our shared interests, the European project starts to lose meaning. The treaties and rulings from the European Court of Justice clearly define our shared identity, but putting those principles into action is where things get tricky. Here is when this often proves more complex than it seems on paper.

The nostalgia for lost sovereignty, the perceived arrogance of European institutions, the lack of attention to European political processes, and the resistance to shared values are key factors shaping Europe’s polarization.

Looking at a structural level, we can see how European and national voting patterns differ. The underlying causes of polarization, which Miguel Lucas’ report for this magazine addresses effectively, are the same. However, its reflection on voter behavior has nuances, as discussed above.

**The European political process is often treated as peripheral when, in reality, it plays the most decisive role in shaping the future of the continent’s citizens.**

Other factors also influence voter behavior, causing the same voter to act differently in national versus European elections. Among all these factors, one stands out and concerns society as a whole: the inconsistency of leaders, political parties, the media, social agents, and citizens in addressing the European political process. This issue is often overlooked, but in reality, it is the one that most decisively shapes the future of European citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> LLYC report: Social conversation analysis - European Union



JUAN CARLOS GOZZER

Partner and CEO Latin America at LLYC / Brazil

## LATIN AMERICA: NAVIGATING CROSSWINDS IN A SHIFTING MARKET

Since the 1970s and 80s, we've often heard the term "bulletproof economies" in Latin America, referring to how the economic landscape, business environment—and everyday life—adapted to the social and political volatility of the time. Meanwhile, academics drew a line between the "real country" and the "political country," noting the existence of two parallel, often dystopian realities.

Over time, technology and social and political transformations have blurred these lines, creating a modern Latin American reality that pushes forward not through consensus but amidst the tensions of polarization and fragmentation. This trend is not unique to Latin America; it is a global phenomenon in democracies.

The elections of recent years—more than a dozen in 2024 alone—have become a barometer of this polarization. High-profile cases, such as the 2023 presidential elections in Argentina and Mexico or Brazil's municipal elections, reveal an irreconcilable clash of visions, as we have also seen in Chile, Colombia, and Peru.

It's difficult to determine whether the current situation reflected in Latin American elections is caused by a society that is overly politicized in an inconsistent manner or if it stems from a trivialization of politics fueled by hatred, fake news, and an "anything goes" mentality aimed at discrediting opponents.

According to LLYC's analysis of social media conversations in Latin America about social and political issues (abortion, feminism, climate

change), only 1 in 33 mentions, in 2023, expressed doubt or reflection. The rest were clear-cut stances, showing how these opinions spill into political outcomes.

Society fragments into like-minded communities that reject differences. This dynamic leads to the waning implementation of long-term state policies, with public policies lasting only as long as the prevailing "vision" (continuity or "punishment vote") in electoral outcomes. Societies and economies are exposed to the swings of polarization, though its intensity varies across the region.

It's important to note that, with few exceptions like Venezuela, Latin America's democratic systems and institutions have been resilient enough to maintain the "rules of the game" in electoral processes. For now, the dispute isn't over the survival of democracy but over its use—not to serve the common good but to impose the interests or vision of one side over the other. In Latin America, polarization increasingly resembles a sports fan who enjoys the rival's defeat more than their own team's victory.

This lack of common ground or "social pacts" profoundly impacts key issues for the region and the world, such as climate change and environmental policies. It also affects the progress of social and economic policies promoting inclusion, respect for diversity, education, regional cooperation, and sustainable job creation—issues central to Latin America.

However, political polarization shouldn't obstruct the region's progress in education, social rights,

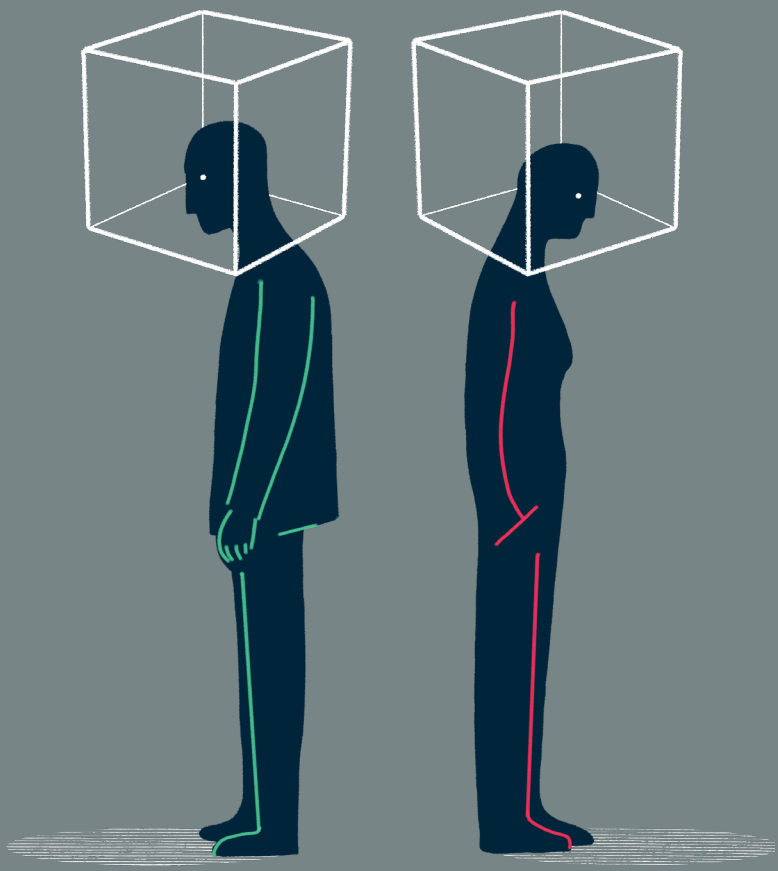
entrepreneurship, innovation (think of Latin American unicorns), science, creativity, and culture.

Businesses and other key social and economic stakeholders play a crucial role in reducing polarization. Our Latin American societies need better, more responsible communication. It's not about taking sides between "good" and "evil" but about actively shaping transformation and fostering dialogue—a rich, coherent, and constructive dialogue beyond the superficiality of greenwashing or meme culture.

We do not change society by changing politics; it's the other way around. And businesses can't afford to sit out this process or only engage based on economic metrics. We must create and encourage spaces for real exchanges of ideas, combating fake news and refusing to fuel the spread of hate or polarization. This commitment extends to our communication strategies, as well as marketing, paid media, sponsorships, and beyond.

We are all in the same boat, navigating choppy waters and crosswinds. Sitting back and hoping the wind will blow in our favor misses the point: we are navigating in a paper boat. What we need is a solid ship to weather the storm, any way the wind blows.

**Businesses and other social and economic stakeholders have a crucial role in reducing polarization. Societies worldwide need more responsible communication.**







## CONCEIÇÃO ZAGALO

Advisor at LLYC Portugal and President of the General Assembly of various NGOs / Portugal

In a world where technology connects us instantly, one might expect that media and social networks would broaden dialogue and encourage inclusivity. Instead, we are witnessing the fragmentation of public discourse, with social media playing a central role in amplifying polarization. This phenomenon is particularly troubling in Portugal, where a long-standing tradition of dialogue and moderation faces challenges in the digital age.

### POLARIZATION IN PORTUGAL

Like other European countries, Portugal has seen a gradual rise in polarization across both traditional media and social networks. While the nation continues to show relatively moderate political polarization compared to other EU countries, trust in the media has been waning. In 2024, 58% of Portuguese citizens reported trust in the news generally, and 62% trusted the news they consumed—a slight erosion compared to previous years.

According to the Digital News Report Portugal 2024, 63% of Portuguese people use social media as their primary news source, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and increasingly TikTok leading the way. While these platforms offer quick and varied access to information, they also contribute to creating “epistemic bubbles”—environments where users primarily encounter content that reinforces their beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. This issue is exacerbated by the prevalence of fake news, which, when widely spread on these platforms, not only deepens polarization but also reinforces the bubbles. Users sharing misinformation

# POLARIZATION IN PORTUGAL’S MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: A CALL FOR CHANGE

heightens the perception of truth within their groups.

Here are some specific examples of fake news identified by Polígrafo circulating in Portugal:

- Immigration and elections: During the 2024 legislative elections, a conspiracy theory claimed that the regularization of immigrants would secure votes for the ruling party. It was suggested that immigrants, mainly Brazilians, would be granted automatic residency and voting rights. However, this was refuted, as only Brazilians with equal political rights status could vote, and even then, specific legal requirements apply.
- Immigrants’ access to healthcare: Another false claim, propagated by André Ventura, alleged that Portuguese emigrants were losing access to the National Health Service (SNS), while immigrants enjoyed full, unrestricted access. The government clarified that emigrants still had full access to the SNS, and immigrants’ rights varied based on their legal status.
- World Youth Day 2024 (WYD): Social media falsely reported that “thousands of attendees” had “disappeared” during the event, linking it to illegal immigration. This was debunked, as no such disappearances were reported.

Additionally, 58% of users aged 18-24 prefer consuming news through short videos on social media, revealing a shift toward more emotional and often shallow content consumption. The algorithms on these platforms, prioritizing content that generates engagement, tend to promote

polarizing and sensationalist narratives, reducing space for moderate, informed debate. As a result, users are increasingly exposed to extreme opinions, worsening social fragmentation.

### **SOCIAL NETWORKS: CONFRONTATION ARENA OR SPACES FOR DIALOGUE?**

Initially conceived as platforms for sharing ideas and fostering interaction, social networks have evolved into digital battlegrounds. A study by Universidade Nova de Lisboa, showed that interactions on social media during electoral periods—specifically during an analysis of polarization in Brazil’s elections—revealed a clear trend of affective polarization, where users displayed stronger emotional ties to candidates than to the issues being debated. This trend is also evident in Portugal, where online political debates often devolve into clashes between party supporters, leaving little room for constructive dialogue.

When examining topics like feminism, climate change, and immigration, it’s clear that social media debates in Portugal are dominated by extremism. Online discussions amplify radical viewpoints, drowning out moderate voices that could foster a more balanced understanding. According to Marktest’s report on digital media consumption in Portugal, polarizing content generates the highest engagement on social media, while more measured opinions garner less traction.

### **THE IMPACT OF POLARIZATION ON TRADITIONAL MEDIA**

While social networks are a primary source of polarization, traditional media also face significant challenges. Reuters Institute notes that although Portugal enjoys one of the highest levels of trust in its media, journalists are struggling with

increasing economic and structural pressures, which affect the quality of journalism. Faced with the need to attract more audiences in a saturated market, many media outlets amplify radical and controversial voices in a bid to generate clicks and views. This distorts public debate and erodes trust in responsible, moderate journalism.

Portugal’s low willingness to pay for digital news further complicates the situation. Only 11% of news consumers in the country pay for digital content, forcing media outlets to rely heavily on advertising and clickbait strategies, which often promote polarizing content.

### **THE ROLE OF COMPANIES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN PROMOTING DIALOGUE**

If social networks and traditional media are amplifying polarization, the role of companies and organizations in fostering more constructive and inclusive dialogue becomes crucial. Associação GRACE, which I am proud to have co-founded, has long advocated that businesses have a social responsibility beyond profit generation and should be active agents in promoting social cohesion.

In this polarized landscape, organizations must create environments that foster empathy and dialogue, both internally and in their external communications. Businesses can play a pivotal role by leading communication campaigns that promote respect for diverse opinions and encourage more inclusive participation in public discourse. In this, creating spaces for active listening and constructive dialogue—whether on social media or in traditional media—is essential to mitigating polarization and rebuilding the public sphere as a place of engagement, not confrontation.

One example in Portugal is the “Empresas com Propósito” initiative, which encourages companies to incorporate socially responsible practices into their communication strategies, promoting open dialogue. Additionally, companies like EDP have developed sustainability campaigns to raise consumer awareness of cooperation rather than division. This approach can be replicated to combat polarization by promoting campaigns that encourage critical thinking and active listening.

Another relevant example is Sonae, which has promoted diversity and inclusion through its social and environmental responsibility practices, tackling issues that directly affect social polarization, such as combating discrimination and promoting equal opportunities. These companies demonstrate that it is possible to play an active role in rebuilding a healthier, more inclusive public space.

## **A CALL FOR CHANGE**

Portugal stands at a crossroads where the impact of polarization, especially on social networks, threatens the foundations of democratic dialogue. However, rather than waiting for regulatory intervention or state action, the solution lies in collective action and concrete proposals to counter this fragmentation.

Building a healthy public space must begin with more responsible and ethical communication. The solution to polarization on social media cannot be reduced a mere call for empathy; it requires a multidimensional intervention. First, it is essential to strengthen media literacy, educating citizens to consume information critically. Second, digital platforms must take a more active role in moderating content, effectively combating misinformation, and promoting a diversity of opinions. Third, companies and organizations must lead by example, adopting campaigns that foster

inclusion and respect for diverse viewpoints. These are crucial steps to preserving the democratic values that have long characterized Portuguese society and ensuring that the public sphere remains a place of engagement, not division.

As I always say, where there are people, there is life and hope. And it is that hope we must nurture every day, with every gesture, every word, and every interaction.



## MARTIN BARON

Journalist and Former Executive Editor  
of *The Washington Post* / US

**M**artin Baron is one of the most esteemed American journalists of his generation. He's been the editor of the *Miami Herald*, *The Boston Globe*, and, for nearly a decade, *The Washington Post*.

Throughout his career, Baron demonstrated an incredible knack for breaking stories that reshaped the political and social landscape of the U.S. But more than that, he was at the helm during the digital transformation of these publications, guiding them toward profitability at a time when traditional journalists were reluctant to give up print, and owners and executives weren't sure of the future business model.

Adding to this challenge, Baron led *The Washington Post* during a time of extreme political polarization in the U.S., which saw new heights under the ownership of Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, who bought the paper in 2014. Baron shares his experiences in his book *Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and The Washington Post*. We caught up with him via Zoom to discuss it all.

**Q.** A lot of your career has been focused on adapting newspapers to the digital age and dealing with budget cuts. Now that the subscription model is mainstream and many outlets are turning a profit, would you say that long transition period is over?

**A.** No. I think we will have to reevaluate our business model every six years or so, maybe even less. Two years ago, generative artificial intelligence (AI) was barely mentioned. Today, it's a dominant topic, with discussions centered on its profound impact on society, journalism, and our business model.

Sometimes, we think that technology is advancing so rapidly that our only job is to keep up. But it's more than that. We must embrace it, rethink how we structure and deliver information, what types of stories resonate, and pay close attention to how people want to consume news, which is constantly changing. Journalists need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable—that will be our permanent state.

**We'll need to reassess our business model every five years, maybe less. Just two years ago, no one was talking about generative AI, and now it's the only thing anyone talks about.**

**Q.** Have journalists adapted to these changes?

**A.** We know how to gather information. And now, we're hiring more people with specific technical skills to assess what's happening online and analyze it, especially regarding social media or how AI is being used. People who can detect and interpret trends and understand data.

But when it comes to storytelling, there's a tendency in our profession to focus more on how things were done in the past than on how they should be done now. And that's constantly evolving because the way people consume news and information in general is always changing. Journalists need to adjust their mindset, but many resist. It's unsettling to have to change how we work every few years or less. But, unfortunately, that's the reality. We're much more like the tech industry now.

# INTERVIEW

**Q.** And, like tech, we've become more dependent on metrics.

**A.** It's essential to our business. We're not just creating a product but maintaining a relationship with our readers. That's led us to focus on understanding how people want to receive information and using metrics to gauge their satisfaction. What do they want? How can we deliver it better

**Q.** That was important for the business side—shifting to make readers the main revenue source rather than relying on advertising.

**A.** I'm not sure if it will be the primary source, but readers must be a significant source of revenue, far greater than in the past when we had no subscribers. While newspapers will continue to rely on advertising, events, and possibly other income sources, readers must be at the core.

Facebook has downgraded the relevance of news; it was once a major traffic source but now contributes very little. Similarly, as generative AI responses increasingly replace search results, Google will also drive much less traffic to media outlets. X, too, contributes only a small amount of traffic. News organizations will need to cultivate a direct relationship with readers, ideally encouraging them to pay for content as they did in the past and establish a direct connection similar to what existed before.

**Q.** Beyond technological shifts, media outlets have also lost credibility. Is that because many people think they're biased, driven by ideology or other interests?

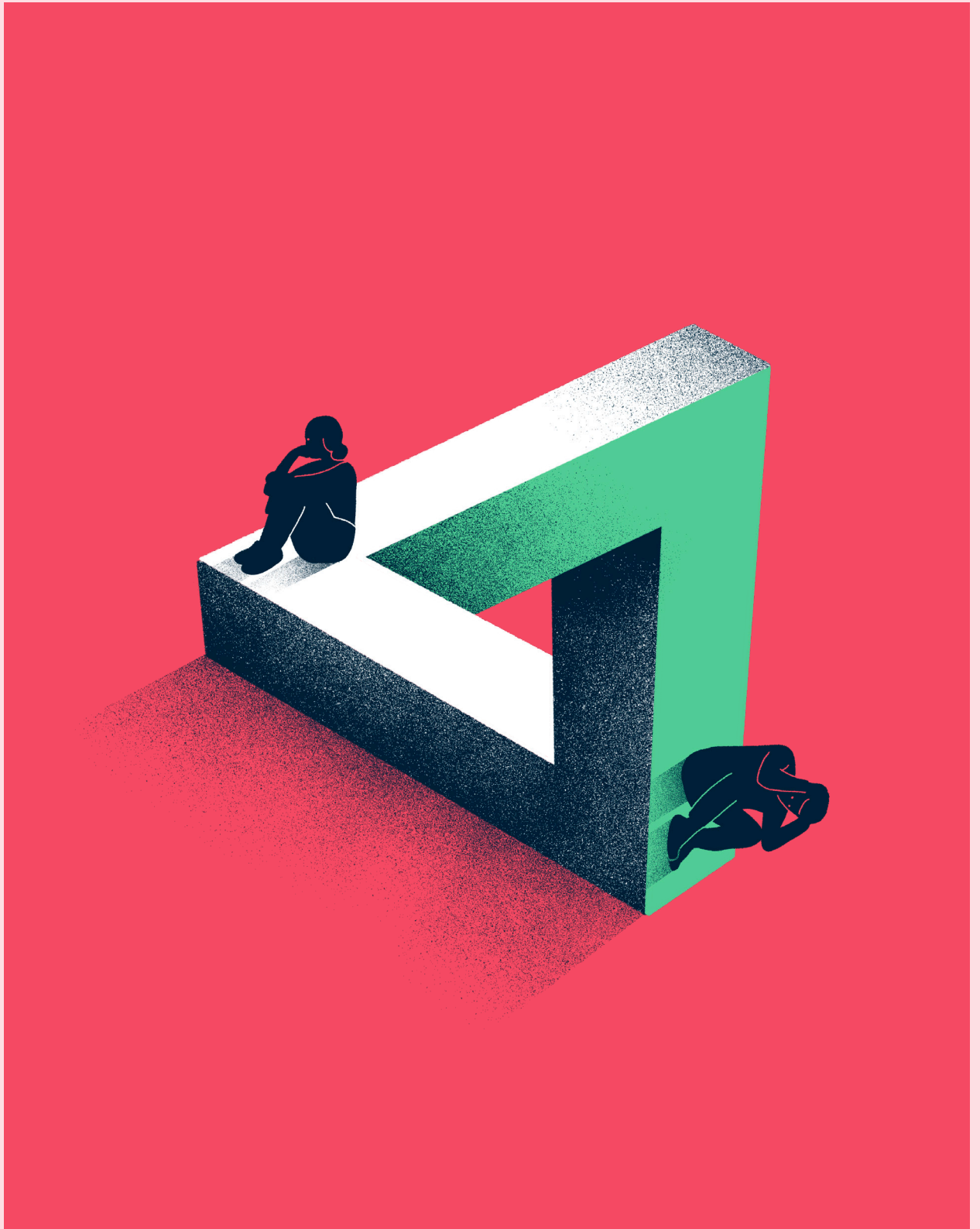
**Media outlets must establish a direct relationship with their readers, ideally getting them to pay for information again, just like before. This would help foster a stronger connection.**

**A.** The core issue goes deeper than bias—it has to do with the rise of the internet. Now, anyone can create a media outlet. Anyone can become a broadcaster or podcaster. The barriers to entry are essentially zero. Often, people gravitate toward sources on social media that reinforce their preexisting views, which can sometimes include conspiracy theories.

There is always someone out there who claims there is a conspiracy. Someone who, for personal, political, or commercial reasons, is deliberately spreading false information. That wasn't the case in the past. Today, the challenge for reputable media is to distinguish themselves by making it clear that their central purpose is to verify information. We have a dedicated staff committed to the verification process regardless of their personal beliefs.

**Q.** That's a tough process.

**A.** But if we don't, we'll end up as another partisan player in the political arena. And that's not a path to long-term success. It definitely takes work. Many people want us to take sides—to be part of the partisan process. But I believe a significant portion of society still values having an independent referee of facts.



**Q.** Especially in this polarized climate. Is this political polarization really different from what has always existed in democracies?

**A.** I believe so. However, there are some key differences from the past. The most important thing is that, in the past, we disagreed on policy solutions, but we mostly agreed on a common set of facts. We agreed on what constituted objective reality, even if we disagreed with the policies. Today, we don't share a common set of facts. In fact, it's worse—we can't even agree on determining what is a fact.

In the past, we used education, knowledge, experience, and especially evidence—what we could see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears—to establish objective reality. Today, all of that has been devalued. It's a dangerous environment for journalism, for sure, but also for democracy and society at large. We've seen this in politics and in health and science, especially during the pandemic and since then.

**Q.** In your book, you seem relatively optimistic about the future of journalism and communication, even though politics is going through a rough patch.

**A.** Yes, I like to stay optimistic. We need to succeed, and I don't know anyone who's been successful while expecting to fail. We've faced tough times before and made it through. And we've reinvented ourselves as a profession. We need to keep doing that.

However, our future is closely tied to democracy. There can't be a free and independent press without democracy, but democracy also can't exist without a free and independent press. As long as democracy is alive, society will need to know what's happening in their communities and countries—that's the role of the press. I believe people will come to understand the difference

between verified information and unverified information—the difference between professional journalism and someone who just started posting online yesterday without the resources to do any fact-checking. I'm optimistic as long as we keep doing our job.

**There can be no democracy without a free and independent press. However, there can also be no free and independent press without democracy.**



**GEMMA GUTIÉRREZ**  
Europe Marketing Solutions  
General Director / Europe

**S**ince its release in the 1980s, Queen's hit *I Want It All* has never felt more relevant. Growing up with a mother who was a die-hard Freddie Mercury fan, I heard that song countless times at home. Now, it often comes to mind because it could easily be the anthem of our era.

Time is a precious, scarce resource, and the sense of urgency resonates more strongly than ever in today's society. Naturally, this urgency extends to the world of branding. We want brands that are committed, embody values, and act consistently.

In today's fast-paced world, our impatience demands that brands be fully dedicated and unwaveringly consistent - right here, right now. Mixing today's impatience with purpose and politics in the age of polarization creates the perfect storm.

### **THE DIVISIVE CONCEPT OF PURPOSE**

Recently, "purpose" has become the buzzword in marketing. Study after study confirms that today's consumers not only want quality products and services but also demand genuine commitment from brands to address social, environmental, and governance challenges.

Consumption trends show that we buy from companies that reflect our values because they make us feel part of the solution. At the same time, we boycott those that don't because we think that, in doing so, we're helping to prevent the planet's problems.

Large multinationals across multiple sectors have embraced this philosophy, developing

# I WANT IT ALL AND I WANT IT NOW

sustainability and social responsibility plans aimed at reducing their environmental footprint and promoting equality and community well-being. Meanwhile, new companies have emerged with these principles already at their core, building their business models and brand narratives on ethical values.

However, the concept of purpose has had time to spark polarization among brand-building professionals. Opinions vary widely, with some viewing it as greenwashing or forced. It's also led to activist CEOs being celebrated in some cases and ousted in others for championing it.

### **BRANDS ARE NOT POLARIZING—POLITICS IS**

When brands take a stand, they risk getting caught up in polarization, which is rooted in politics. Consumers' reactions fluctuate between fierce loyalty—"love brand"—and outright hostility—"brand rage." A prime example of this is the famous sneaker campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. While many Americans praised the campaign, others called for a boycott, even going as far as publicly burning their sneakers.

The declining social consensus presents a major challenge for brands, particularly the larger, more powerful ones. These brands often rely on a broad, inclusive range of values, but that clashes with a society that tends to express its core values in starkly opposing terms, as Miller and Bolte suggest. Today, values and social causes are deeply politicized, and it's at this intersection where brands and polarization collide.



## THE MESSENGER MATTERS

Generation Z values authenticity and prefers peer-to-peer communication over traditional corporate messaging. They trust their peers more than big companies. This creates an additional challenge for brands: it's no longer just about whether or not to engage with purpose or which social cause to align with, but ultimately, the opportunity might not lie in the message itself—but in who delivers it.

The messenger is either the biggest hurdle or a key enabler. Gen Z craves authenticity, so brands face the dual challenge—and opportunity—of developing influence strategies where key opinion leaders (KOLs), employees, and influencers (macro, micro, and nano) become the voice of their purpose. Their authority can resonate far more effectively than any corporate spokesperson.

## TRANSFORMATION TAKES TIME

We're seeing that social commitment is no longer optional; it's essential. The key is to pursue it authentically and thoughtfully while also choosing messengers who bring the most credibility.

Brands must also recognize that by positioning themselves on social and values-driven issues, they're inevitably stepping into the political arena, where polarization is unavoidable.

But what about the factor of time in this era of polarization? I can't help but think that impatience fuels polarization—it's the perfect breeding ground. I often notice an overwhelming demand for brands to display extreme coherence in their actions, decisions, and messaging, even when they openly acknowledge that their plans for change will take time—sometimes decades.

There's something incredibly positive about these expectations for brands, as they reinforce the idea

that brands can be social agents of change. But, too often, we lose sight of the fact that any process of transformation or evolution requires time.

If we don't give brands the time to move toward positive social, environmental, and governance impacts, they may decide it's not worth the effort. They may opt out of the polarization game altogether, focusing instead on short-term commercial gains. It would be a shame—but, of course, there will always be those who see things differently.



**PATRICIA FERNÁNDEZ**

Clinical Psychologist at Hospital  
Ramón y Cajal / Spain

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH POLARIZATION

**D**evelopmental psychology experts, such as psychiatrist Pablo Malo Ocejo, author of *The Dangers of Morality*, note that humans have a natural tendency to divide the world into “us” and “them.”

This inclination stems from an anthropological constant: since prehistoric times, we have felt safer and more at ease with people from our own “tribe.”

The society we live in today is much more complex than ancient societies because we have to coexist with diverse groups of people. For many, this presents a challenge, especially for those who are more polarized. These individuals might feel that they can’t date someone who votes for a particular party, that certain newspapers should be avoided because their stance is predictable, or that if someone insults a specific football team, they’re insulting them personally. The ‘others’ are seen not as complex individuals but reduced to a single trait.

Polarization takes these ideas to the extreme, fostering hostility toward anyone who doesn’t share one’s identity or values.

Some people are more prone to psychological polarization due to a combination of individual and social factors, such as rigid cognitive patterns, cognitive biases, identity-shaping experiences during adolescence, pressure from their environments to conform, the need for belonging, and particular personality traits.

This process doesn’t happen overnight but develops gradually. “Polarized thinking” refers to the dichotomous mindset described by Aaron Beck, which categorizes reality in black-and-white terms without recognizing any middle ground.

Experts like Fonagy and Bateman call this low-mentalization thinking, as it’s based on the belief that one’s thoughts and feelings are inherently correct.

Polarized thinking is closely tied to identity formation during adolescence, a critical period when one’s sense of self is often built on ideas that are emotionally charged yet not deeply considered, linked to values, morality, tastes, or ideological opinions. This need for belonging drives the polarization process, where identity is constructed in opposition to others and increasingly relies on having an “enemy.”

**The development of polarized thinking is closely tied to identity formation during a critical stage like adolescence.**

While polarized thinking can remain dormant at times, it tends to resurface in moments of political or social tension triggered by emotions such as anger or fear. Even when faced with facts, highly polarized individuals resist changing their views, as their identity intertwines with their beliefs.

Polarized attitudes generally lead to conflict and confrontation. Studies suggest that more polarized individuals tend to be less stable, more insecure, or impulsive, and may lack social cognition or empathy.

According to the Five-Factor Model of personality, proposed by psychologists Lewis Goldberg and Warren Norman, there are five core dimensions of personality:

- openness to experience
- conscientiousness
- extraversion
- agreeableness
- neuroticism

Research like Steven W. Webster's *It's Personal: The Big Five Personality Traits and Negative Partisan Affect* finds that people who score high in agreeableness and extraversion are less likely to polarize. Other studies, such as *The Dark Triad Predicts Public Display of Offensive Political Products*, suggest that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—the "Dark Triad" traits—can contribute to polarization, with psychopathy playing a particular role in extreme political expression.

Even during the most polarized times of an individual's life since adolescence, reality can sometimes soften beliefs through a process of assimilation, accommodation, and cognitive maturation, as described by Piaget. The current issue is that we are inundated with information that validates our preconceptions, especially on social media, disrupting our cognitive flexibility.

Research by Jay Van Bavel<sup>1</sup> indicates that X usage is linked to this phenomenon. Polarized thinking and behavior can be hard to overcome due to the instant gratification these platforms provide.

People tend to seek content that offers acceptance and validation to escape negative emotional states like anger or worry. Dopamine, a neurotransmitter, drives this attachment to polarized content. When it's absent, withdrawal-like symptoms can occur, increasing screen time and causing a loss of control. This cycle of apparent online safety reduces uncertainty and anxiety, providing a sense of purpose and belonging while minimizing feelings of loneliness.

**Polarization can have a significant impact on mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional issues, and it can drive people to make poor decisions.**

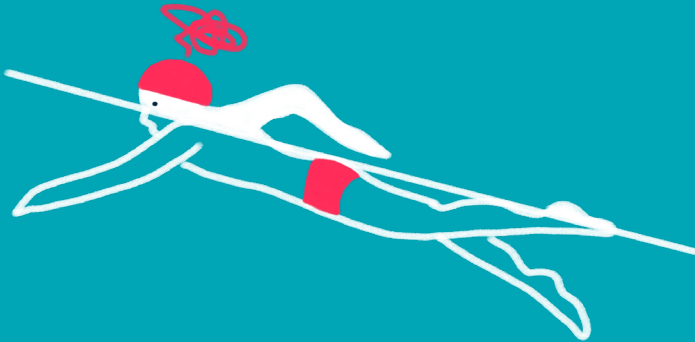
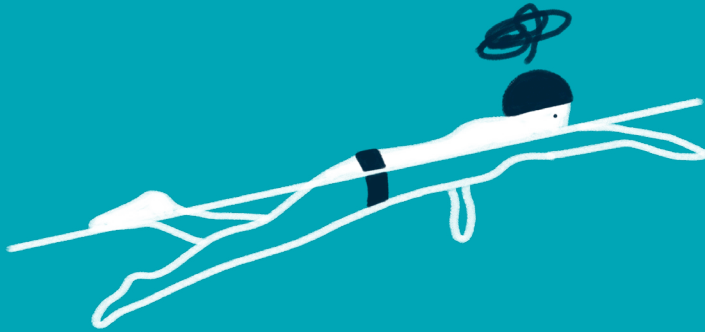
Polarization can have a significant impact on mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional issues. It can result in poor decisions, such as refusing medical treatments that contradict one's beliefs, thereby putting one's health at risk.

Emotionally, polarization fosters hostility and anger, correlating with lower well-being and fewer positive emotions. Seeking professional help might be advisable for those experiencing polarization-related emotional problems.

Polarization divides society into opposing groups with conflicting values, making it harder to find common ground. Additionally, it negatively

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jayvanbavel.com>



impacts mental health. To address this, political efforts should prioritize unity over division. In today's climate, moralizing certain societal issues and deepening unnecessary divisions only makes coexistence more difficult.

**To avoid polarization, it is vital to consciously follow some basic guidelines, particularly when discussing with others.**

Narratives fueled by distrust and identity insecurity often intensify polarized attitudes. In journalism, promising research, such as *Can We Make News Less Polarizing?*,<sup>2</sup> explores the possibility of warning labels for polarizing content to prevent it from further dividing readers.

On an individual level, it's important to recognize that our minds are naturally tribal, and no one is entirely immune to polarization. Resisting polarization, while more challenging for some, demands conscious effort from everyone. This includes practicing active listening, approaching conversations with curiosity and humility, remaining open to new perspectives, regularly questioning personal beliefs, avoiding the urge to change others' opinions, and fostering a more analytical mindset that prioritizes facts and reason over emotions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://spsp.org/news/character-and-context-blog/kubin-von-sikorski-can-we-make-news-less-polarizing>



MARTÍN RODRÍGUEZ YEBRA

Newsroom Secretary  
at *La Nación* / Argentina

## JAVIER MILEI, THE POLARIZATION PROPHET

Javier Milei won the election without a party or teams, state experience, or funding. Given the persistent economic crisis, he offered an anxious society a radical program of cuts and hardline measures when he realized that chaos could be a more appealing option than the status quo. And if Argentines were going to make a bold decision, communication had to fulfill its duty: to help them.

Milei's success is rooted in his ability to adapt to discourse, aesthetics, and political trends. His campaign and government have skillfully exploited social anger, using extreme polarization and strategic aggression to their advantage.

He fits perfectly into the stereotype of the troll-president, guided by the logic of algorithms that govern social networks. Becoming a "trend" is a matter of State for Milei. He celebrates the view metrics of his tweets as trophies, unashamed to compare himself with global figures who inspired him, like Donald Trump. He thinks in terms of audiences rather than citizens. A network of influencers amplifies the official narrative, attacks adversaries, and identifies traitors.

There are no forbidden tactics to grab attention, such as Milei's photo holding a running chainsaw and the promise to "disrupt the establishment." Even vulgarity can be a virtue. Milei understood this well when he incorporated the word *carajo* ["damn"] into his battle cry: "Long live freedom!" It doesn't matter if he exasperates some as long as he excites many others.

His critics used to highlight the institutional weakness of his formation: "It's just him, his sister,

and his five dogs." Over time, they discovered that the description would be intolerably unfair if it didn't include the communication guru, Santiago Caputo. This 38-year-old consultant designed the presidential campaign and now acts as the de facto head of the administration, even though he is officially just an advisor.

Milei was a diamond in the rough in Caputo's hands. Television producers were the first to detect something magnetic in this character, who could combine academic analysis with insults, the wild hair and the sobriety of a dark suit, religious morality, and fury against the establishment. They turned him into a full-time panelist during the years when Argentines began to see decline as destiny.

**TV producers saw something magnetic in Milei. They made him a full-time commentator just as Argentinians were beginning to feel they were destined for a downfall.**

Caputo helped Milei shed the caricature without losing freshness. He applied methods and norms of the trade that had already succeeded in other countries in the region. Aggressive, messianic, and divisive leadership is becoming the new normal in Latin America, from Jair Bolsonaro's experience in Brazil to Gustavo Petro in Colombia or Nayib Bukele in El Salvador to Andrés López Obrador in Mexico.

Chavismo and its allies—such as the Kirchnerism that Milei defeated—stand out as distant inspirations for these polarizing exercises. If those “pioneers” of the left fought against the oligarchy, Milei’s monster is the State.

The “chaos engineers” who dominate digital mediation have perfected the technique. They work with the premise that there is a transfer of power from the political sphere to the technological one: the discussion has moved from cafes and TV studios to mobile phones.

Platform dynamics aim to increase the time users spend connected. Inflamed messages triumph over calm debate. If the adversary is hurt, so much the better. Tolerance and dissent are consigned to the despised corner of political correctness.

Milei follows a well-tested script. He portrays himself as the executioner who will end the “caste” that condemns his country to failure, drawing the line between good and evil. His ability to incite anger frightens his adversaries; he shapes public opinion by determining who to blame and who to accept in the new order.

He makes a virtue of contradiction. In the digital ecosystem, various messages work for different audiences, and majorities can be forged by interacting with dispersed communities. All that is needed is intelligent segmentation.

Unlike other leaders, the Argentine president is, above all, a believer. A prophet of the ideas that will turn Argentina into “the most prosperous nation on Earth.” He adds a moral component to the liberalism he preaches, which radicalizes every discussion.

In times when people are turning away from politics, he offers a mythology. His identity anchor is a past of economic greatness, similar to how nationalism, religion, or race serve that role in other regions.

He often resorts to shouting and insults. He appears “authentic.” If politics is theater, he steps on stage to play himself.

That’s why he rejects the artifices of classic politics. Milei has not held a single press conference in eight months of government. He says journalism is a thing of the past and that traditional media no longer influence public opinion. He is not attracted to giving speeches from a podium. If obliged, he offers master classes in economic theory. He enjoys engaging on social networks and talking with communicators who let him speak with minimal interruption.

**He claims journalism is outdated and that traditional media no longer shape public opinion. He enjoys engaging with communicators who let him speak freely on social media.**

Thus, he has built a subversive and overwhelming leadership. He now faces a challenge that his admired Trump or Bolsonaro have already experienced. Extreme polarization is often a double-edged sword: effective for gaining power, dangerous for exercising it efficiently.



SANDRA ORTIZ

Peru Corporate Affairs Senior Director / Peru

## HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOUR BUSINESS VALUE?

**N**owadays, every interaction feels like a battleground. The current landscape of public discourse has evolved into one of constant confrontation. Whether it's the fleeting tension of a tweet, a heated exchange on TV, or even a trivial but anxiety-inducing wait in line at the bakery, conflict has shifted from the exception to the norm. And topics like politics, religion, or sports, once catalysts for constructive dialogue, have now become triggers for increasingly aggressive and violent conversations.

This omnipresent polarization divides opinions and intensifies our thoughts and emotions, turning a simple disagreement into visceral rejection. And as if ideological schisms weren't challenging enough, we also face increasing emotional polarization. We know conflicts may stem from ideological differences, but intense and often extreme emotional responses can also fuel them. This emotional aspect of polarization adds complexity to managing communication and public relations. It requires more sensitivity and flexibility in strategies to connect with stakeholders and lessen the impact of these emotional tensions.

Take the United States, for example, where the political landscape is so polarized that entire communities debate whether polarization really exists in the country. On this matter, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has published

a paper addressing potential solutions. "Although Americans aren't as ideologically polarized as they think, they are emotionally polarized (affective polarization)," states the paper. "In other words, they dislike the other political party members." Let's put aside politics, where division is even expected.

Almost every major event has the potential to become a battleground for conflicting ideologies. The 2024 Paris Olympic Games ceremony was no exception, highlighting several controversial dynamics in modern social communication. Some saw the ceremony as a showcase of cultural pride and international unity. In contrast, others viewed it through the lens of economic costs, religious beliefs, political implications, or gender identities and sexual orientations.

**The emotional dimension of polarization adds another layer of complexity to communication management. It demands greater sensitivity and agility in strategy to connect with stakeholders.**

Even Hollywood celebrities can spark division. Last August, actress Blake Lively found herself at the center of a Vogue Spain article<sup>1</sup> titled "Blake Lively and Her Reputation Crisis During the Tumultuous 'Breaking the Circle' Press Tour" The article

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vogue.es/articulos/blake-lively-romper-el-circulo-crisis-reputacion>



focused on the polarization generated among her fans due to her behavior during the film's promotion. Critics argued that instead of being a vocal advocate against gender-based violence, in line with the film's central theme, she focused on promoting her role as a businesswoman and fashionista, igniting a firestorm on platforms like X and TikTok, even among her followers. This shows that polarization is no longer just a phenomenon between allies and detractors, but can also cause division among supporters.

Polarization has been a constant societal issue, but as we've seen, the interconnected nature of social media has exacerbated it, allowing polarizing voices to join forces and amplify their divisive messages.

Naturally, organizations and companies are not immune to this phenomenon. In fact, they are constantly under society's scrutiny. In this environment, businesses must be prepared to overcome these challenges while taking steps to avoid alienating more stakeholders. Safeguarding businesses in today's climate requires a focus on reputation.

How are a company's actions impacting its reputation? How well-prepared is it to handle critical situations arising from potential polarization? The rules of the game have changed, and traditional management styles may be unable to keep pace. Companies need to recalibrate when and how to make themselves heard. There are two paths: Resilience and Antifragility, which shouldn't be mutually exclusive.

The path of Resilience means being able to adapt and recover from adversity. It also requires

- During quiet times, it's essential to equip the company to recognize and analyze warning signals, maintain control, and respond quickly and effectively when necessary. This involves not only having a clear understanding of potential risks but also having action plans in place to help mitigate them.
- Engage in active listening to ensure the company understands the diverse perspectives of its stakeholders. This process enables the company to collect feedback from various perspectives, predict potential issues more effectively, and proactively address concerns.

**Companies must be prepared to face these challenges strategically. The goal? Avoid alienating more stakeholders while protecting and strengthening corporate reputation.**

An Antifragility strategy requires the company to thrive and grow in volatile contexts, so the company doesn't freeze in the face of this downpour of risks, falling like Tetris blocks.

- Leading corporate communication is essential, as the worst-case scenario is facing a risk without a reputational buffer. At the very least, a strong reputation gives the company the benefit of the doubt.
- Investing in initiatives that bring the company's purpose to life, prioritizing these over short-term gains.



- Applying a Brand/Reputation systems-thinking approach helps the company identify opportunities to develop its storydoing, which should align with brand pillars (Personality, Promise, Culture, and Purpose) and reputational drivers (Personality, Promise, Culture, Purpose, and Contribution).

In order to gain positive recognition from stakeholders, it is crucial to establish a reputation based on responsible and sustainable management. This requires deeply integrating a model that reflects the concerns of our stakeholders into every decision made. Companies that effectively align their corporate values with the expectations of their audiences will not only survive but thrive in our increasingly polarized environment. In a world where division and conflict are on the rise, organizations that demonstrate adaptability and strategic alignment will be the only ones capable of successfully navigating these turbulent times.

**The real challenge in gaining the trust of our stakeholders lies in building a reputation grounded in a management model that is inherently responsible and sustainable.**



RAMÓN GONZÁLEZ FÉRRIZ  
Editorial Advisor at LLYC / Spain

**P**olarization has long been a structural feature of all democracies, but in recent years, it has transformed and become more extreme. Following the financial crisis, polarization was mainly ideological, with citizens clashing over political issues like bank bailouts, taxes, or public spending. But it has since evolved, creeping into daily life and shaping people's preferences in areas seemingly unrelated to politics—like the sports they follow, their diets, the clothes they wear, or the neighborhoods they choose to live in.

This trend started in the United States. Ezra Klein, a journalist at *The New York Times* and one of the leading experts on polarization, describes this shift in terms of “macro-identities.” Being “left” or “right” no longer means holding certain political views or voting for a particular party; it now affects every aspect of life, including personal relationships, work, and consumer habits. Klein argues that if you know whether someone is vegetarian or which school their children attend, you can probably guess the rest of their opinions. We've become members of a monolithic bloc facing off against the others. And this reality is spreading to more countries.

“A certain degree of polarization is normal and even desirable,” says Yanina Welp, a researcher at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and member of the Scientific Council of the Elcano Royal Institute. Welp has studied polarization in Latin America, and in her latest book, *The Will of the People: Populism and Citizen Participation in Latin America*,

## HOW DO WE BREAK AWAY FROM POLARIZATION?

she explains: “It becomes a problem when we experience extreme ideological polarization and affective polarization.” Affective polarization, she says, occurs when we no longer feel part of a broad society but rather a smaller, more insular community defined by an “us” versus “them” mentality. And that's where we find ourselves today.

**Is there a way to manage more effectively the natural conflicts that arise in a democracy? How can we rebuild consensus after a long period of disagreement?**

Political scientists, marketing experts, and journalists are increasingly grasping the intricacies of polarization. At the same time, some politicians and media outlets continue to exploit it for votes or ratings. Now, the key questions are: how do we move past this? Is there a formula for resolving the conflicts inherent in democracy in a more controlled way? How can we rebuild consensus after such a long period of social and political strife?

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

There's a consensus that this situation will persist for a while. But from there, opinions differ. "Civil society has launched initiatives that promote dialogue between people with opposing views," says Welp. "These efforts are commendable and have some impact, but scaling them is difficult." Many of these initiatives emphasize civic education, the rule of law, or the idea that, despite what the loudest voices claim, there are no simple solutions to complex issues like immigration or energy transition. However, most of these initiatives remain confined to small circles of people deeply concerned about the polarized climate and its effect on governance and the economy. They often fail to reach broader segments of the population.

Manuel Arias Maldonado, a political science professor at the University of Málaga and author of the newly published book *(Post)Truth and Democracy*, suggests that citizens may eventually tire of polarization and express their frustration by voting for alternative parties or reflecting it in opinion polls. "As newspaper readers or consumers, they might also punish organizations and individuals who intensify polarization," he says. "But given the dominance of political parties, media outlets, and dogmatic citizens (who wield the most influence on social media), the likelihood of polarization's more exaggerated forms persisting is quite high."

One commonly suggested solution, endorsed by both scholars and some politicians, is to regulate social media and digital journalism to curb misinformation, which is often blamed for fueling polarization. Arias Maldonado, however, is skeptical of this approach—not just because it would challenge liberal democracy's core principle of free speech but also because "governments are

often the primary sources of misinformation," he argues. In his book, he notes that society may be overestimating the impact of so-called "post-truth" on today's political landscape.

"The challenges facing modern liberal democracies can be explained in many ways, and neither the devaluation of truth nor the impact of digitalization are necessarily the most decisive factors. Claiming that populist or authoritarian leaders are products of post-truth overlooks the fact that such leaders have existed in the past," he writes. As a result, restricting misinformation may have little effect on polarization and could even backfire.

**Some initiatives focus on teaching "depolarization" in schools, helping students acknowledge profound differences and learn how to confront and resolve them.**

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Perhaps the answer lies in long-term initiatives. Some programs focus on teaching "depolarization" in schools. One such initiative has been described by Kent Lenci, a U.S. teacher who believes schools shouldn't aim to be apolitical entities but rather accept that strong disagreements exist and help students confront and resolve them. This could be achieved by teaching media literacy and social-emotional learning. Welp also highlights the role of education, though she acknowledges that it is part of the polarized debate. To help reduce polarization, education should emphasize "methods for understanding specific issues and developing responses" rather than focusing on content alone.

Yanna Krupnikov, a political scientist and professor of communication and media at the University of Michigan, has studied an interesting group: citizens who don't obsessively follow the news or participate in social media political debates but still vote and occasionally switch parties. Krupnikov's research suggests that a society less consumed by the latest headlines—often presented as infotainment—might be less polarized.

There are also strictly political solutions. For instance, political parties could abandon binary, zero-sum proposals—such as monarchy versus republic or independence versus unionism—and instead focus on issues that are more gradual and conducive to negotiation and technical discussions: How much should pensions increase? What's the optimal income tax rate? Should all streets be pedestrianized, or just some?

**Some political scientists argue that a society less fixated on the immediate present—often presented as infotainment—might be less polarized.**

In conclusion, the solutions to our current levels of polarization are neither immediate nor infallible. As with many social issues, we must be prepared to experiment and occasionally fail. Perhaps the first step is to remind society that highly polarized countries tend to experience weaker socioeconomic performance than those with less division. Recognizing this might be an essential first step toward depolarization.

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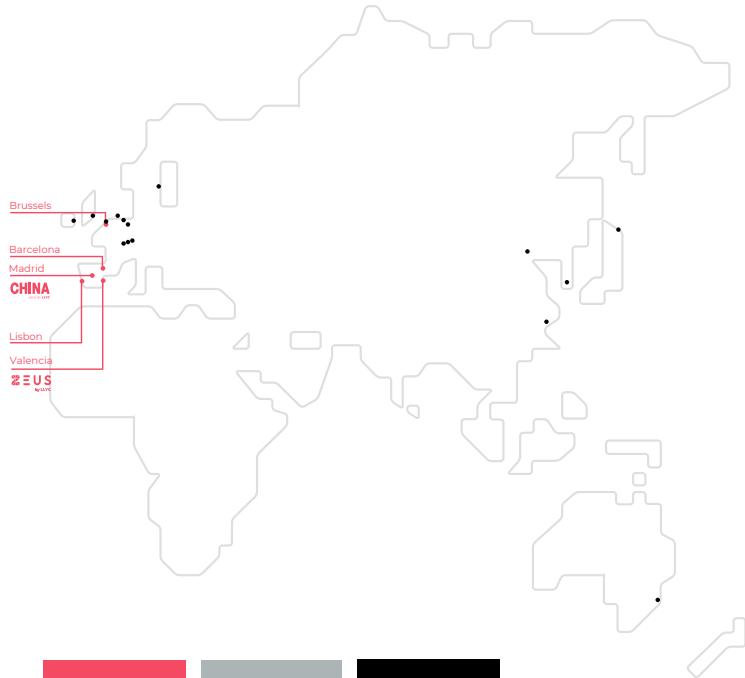
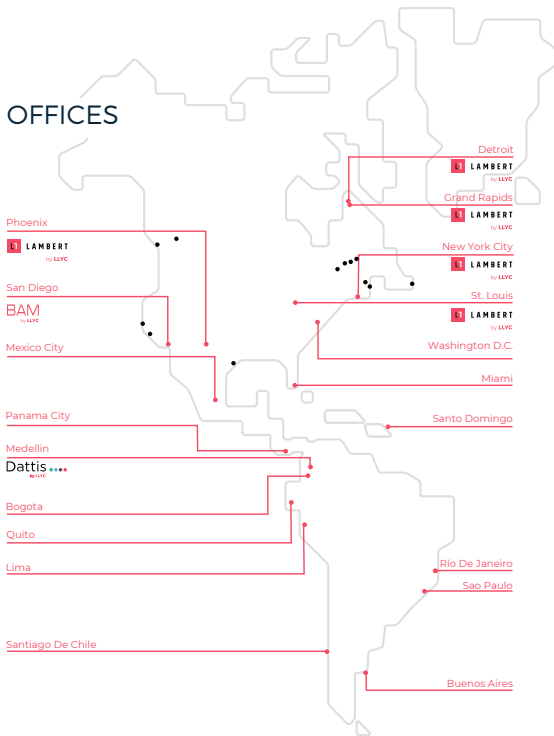
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