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Krabbe, Erik C. W.; van Laar, Jan Albert

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Be reasonable!

How to be an optimist in the ‘Age of Unreason’

Erik C. W. Krabbe and Jan Albert van Laar

University of Groningen

Are we living in an age of unreason? And what to do about it? Can we combat unreason? We discuss situations in which one may presume to be confronted with unreasonable behavior by an interlocutor: fallacies, changing rules of the game, shifting to some other type of dialogue, and abandonment of reasonable dialogue. We recommend ways that could be helpful to obtain a return to reason. These possibilities lead us to a moderately optimistic conclusion.

Keywords: abandonment of reasonable dialogue, bullshit, dialogue shift, fake news, fallacy, game-change, optimism

1. Introduction

The times seem to be changing. And it does not look like a change for the better, at least not to those who value reasonable argumentation as a means for peaceful conflict resolution. It seems that amidst the contemporary plethora of persuasive messages the use of reason is losing ground. Yet it is nothing new to being confronted with attempts at persuasion from all sides. Forty years ago, Johnson and Blair wrote:

As citizens we are constantly being offered persuasive rhetoric from a multitude of directions [...]. The teachers' union, the school board, the city council, irate taxpayers, all are trying to gain your support for higher salaries, lower salaries; a strike, back-to-work legislation; city core redevelopment, rezoning for a suburban shopping mall, bikeathons want you to bike, telethons want you to phone in a pledge. A political party wants you to canvass, your Member of Parliament wants you to return a questionnaire, a pollster wants your opinion. [...] Mothers write letters to the editor favouring abortion on demand, mothers write letters to the editor urging that abortion be outlawed [...] you're terrorized to quit smoking. [...] Are greedy unions the cause of inflation? Or greedy executives? Or nei-

ther? Groups and individuals incessantly vie for your adherence to their way of seeing things, for your acceptance of their view of what is true, important or worth doing. (Johnson and Blair 1983 [1977], p.viii)

In such circumstances, it wouldn't be a good idea to give in to all these claims and therefore it becomes urgent to distinguish good arguments from bad arguments and to resist the latter. That is, we need to be capable of logical self-defense. To get the necessary skills, courses in informal logic, critical thinking, and argumentation theory can be helpful.

But the present situation seems harder to tackle than that described by Johnson and Blair: we seem nowadays to be bombarded by an indiscriminate avalanche of persuasive rubbish, not just fallacious arguments or inserted non-arguments but anything that is pseudo or fake: fake news, bullshit, crackpot theories, alternative facts, blunt inconsistencies and outright lies, seasoned by a sauce of mistrust and hatred. Unreason is ubiquitous, and we seem to get used to that as well; the observation is already old hat.

So are we really living in an age of unreason? What does that mean? Whither argumentation? Will it soon be 'game over' for any reasonable approach to our differences of opinion? Or can we bolster techniques of logical self-defense so as to resist the avalanche, without becoming agents of unreason ourselves?

Our paper is meant as a modest attempt to reflect on such issues. In Section 2 we discuss the concept of an age of unreason and defend the view that pessimism about the use of reason in our times is unwarranted. In Section 3 we resist the view that there is a struggle about reason between two parties: the reasonable and the unreasonable. In Section 4 we describe several characteristic types of situation in which one may perceive a lack of reasonable behavior of one's interlocutor and recommend certain ways of how to deal with these. Section 5 presents a moderately optimistic conclusion.

2. Do we live in an age of unreason?

Donald Trump's style of communication and argument is often perceived as exemplifying the heights of unreason. Here it looks as if all argumentation has been replaced by manipulation. In an article of little more than three pages Lakoff and Duran show how Trump uses language to frame and win debates and how he manipulates the press so as to inculcate his worldview. "Trump knows the press has a strong instinct to repeat his most outrageous claims, and this allows him to put the press to work as a marketing agency for his ideas." (Lakoff and Duran 2018, p.1)

Some of his linguistic manipulation techniques are:

- Weaponizing words (Hilary is always “crooked”, unwelcome news “fake news”, a threatening investigation “a witch-hunt”)
- Weaponized stereotypes (“...defaming entire groups of people as liars, rapists, terrorists...”)
- Weasel words (“...to avoid taking responsibility for a claim”: “Maybe”, “I don’t know”, “We’ll see”)
- Hyperbole (“great”, “terrific”, “the best/worst ever”, “a disaster”)
- Use of “winning” and “losing” (“Those who win deserve to win; those who lose deserve to lose”)
- Use of “America first” (“America is better than other countries, as shown by its wealth and power.”) (Lakoff and Duran 2018, p. 2)

Trump’s style is quite typical of those phenomena that make people believe that we have entered the age of unreason. We do not deny that these phenomena exist or that they can be upsetting. It is also upsetting that in public controversies people are gradually getting accustomed to being confronted with excessively unreasonable contributions. But even in these disturbing circumstances reasonable argument has not completely disappeared. Sometimes Trump gives us an argument. For instance, when he announced the US retraction from the Paris Climate Accord, he argued at the end of his speech as follows:

(1) **Time to exit the Paris Accord**

“The Paris Accord would undermine our economy, hamstring our workers, weaken our sovereignty, impose unacceptable legal risks, and put us at a permanent disadvantage to the other countries of the world. It is time to exit the Paris Accord – (applause) – and time to pursue a new deal that protects the environment, our companies, our citizens, and our country.”

(White House 2017, p. 7)

Now, one may criticize this argument on various accounts, but it can’t be denied that here we have an argument, and that Trump gave us at least five reasons (discussed earlier in the speech) why the Paris Accord would not be acceptable for the US.

Other examples of apparent unreason can be found in publications of European populist parties. Here also, we find that beside manipulation and bullshit, there are also arguments. Take, for instance, the German party *Alternative für Deutschland* [Alternative for Germany] (AfD). A meticulous argumentation analysis by David Lanius of their 2017 election platform reveals plenty of unreason: appeals to popular sentiments, prejudice, false or simplified statements, etc.

Nevertheless, at the end of his paper Lanius concludes that there are also many deductively valid arguments:

The tactics employed by the AfD, and generally by rightwing populists, consists of making false or simplifying claims that appeal emotionally to their supporters and at the same time enable rigorous argumentation. By consequence, it is relatively easy to use the explicit statements of the AfD election platform to reconstruct deductively valid arguments of which the completed premises are comparatively uncontroversial or unproblematic [at least among the AfD's supporters and sympathizers, EK&JAvL]. In the few cases that the completed premises are more controversial or problematic, they follow implicitly from the statements in the AfD election platform. Consequently, the argumentation of the AfD is easy to grasp and can simply be put into a logically valid form.

(Lanius 2017, p.29; our translation)

Given that the presence of lies, bullshit, and appeal to popular sentiments does not exclude the presence of also some *prima facie* reasonable arguments, one may wonder whether unreason has really taken over. One may also doubt whether earlier ages fared much better than the present one. Is there any phenomenon that characterizes the supposed age of unreason and that did not occur in earlier times? If one wants to seriously investigate this question (which we won't), another question arises: When did the age of unreason start? In a paper on the terms "fake news" and "post-truth," Joshua Habgood-Coote raises a similar question: When did the post-truth era start? After mentioning some options, going as far back as the Watergate scandal, he concludes:

Most popular authors connect the era to the 2016 election, gesturing toward historical roots without providing any clarity about when it is supposed to have started [...]. The plethora of potential starting points suggests that 'post-truth [era]' has no clear extension. Everyone agrees that we are living in it, but no-one knows when it is supposed to have started. (Habgood-Coote 2019, p.10)

The same holds for the age of unreason, of which the post-truth era would be an aspect. The consequence is that the term "age of unreason" would be too vague to play a serious role in a philosophical discussion. Also, the idea of a golden age of norms and reason to which we could and should return is pure mythology. "There was never a golden age: the epistemic norms of democracy have never been realised in practice." (Habgood-Coote 2019, p.24).

But even so, the phenomena leading to the impression that there is more and more unreason are to be taken seriously. While all kinds of unreason, from slightly biased use of language to clear-cut bullshit and outright lies, may have been around through the ages, they also have always deserved to meet with criticism and opposition. Moreover, there may presently be an intensification of the

symptoms of unreason due to technological innovations in communication technology. So there is enough reason for being on the alert.

Now should we be optimistic or pessimistic? Past experience shows that unreason has often been dealt with adequately. So why wouldn't we be able to do so in the future? On the other hand, there have also been many failures. So why wouldn't that happen again?¹ We may opt for either optimism or pessimism, for some mixture of both, or refrain from either attitude. But these observations may suffice to establish that it is at least not unreasonable to remain moderately optimistic, and from that perspective to continue the development of tools aimed at enhancing the use of reasonable argumentative exchanges in public life. Having reached this conclusion, it seems we could end the paper here. However there is more to say about what to do when confronted with unreason.

3. Can we combat unreason?

The crucial question about unreasonable words or actions is: how should one react to them? Must we combine forces in a war on unreason? This martial metaphor may be used to strengthen our option for optimism: we are not alone in the struggle. In fact, many have decried the unreason of our times. But, even if, for the occasion, we condone the martial jargon, it may be asked – before we rush to battle: Who is the enemy? Is there really an opposing party of unreason that we, representing the party of reason, must combat?

Let us consider more precisely what is implied in assessing a statement, argument, or action as unreasonable. One cannot do so without, at the same time, assessing oneself as reasonable and possessing a sufficient amount of common sense to make the assessments. That everyone thinks of him- or herself as sufficiently provided with common sense is a well-known point made by Descartes at the very start of his *Discourse on the Method* (Descartes 1637). But, on the other hand, admitting that one could be wrong is also a necessary component of a reasonable attitude. This fallibilistic insight needn't perpetually come to expression, but plays a role in the background as it underlies one's willingness to change one's point of view if one becomes convinced of having been wrong. Thus, it is never excluded that in dismissing something as unreasonable we are ourselves missing

1. As Aikin and Talisse (2019, Chapter 13) point out, we may come to grips with unreason only after it has had its effect, which they call the *Owl of Minerva problem*: "Our vocabulary for assessing public argument must run behind the practices of public argument. By the time our evaluative tools are fashioned, the tactics they were designed to diagnose have already had their effect" (p.183).

the point and that what we perceive as unreason has a hidden rationality, as well as that what we see as our common sense points of view is actually covering our own pits of unreason.

We also think Justin Smith is correct in contending that specific uses of reason may turn out to be self-subverting (2019, p. 27), and that the skilled use of logical inferences, as well as in-depth knowledge of fallacies, can be made into instruments for those who struggle to gain or hold on to power (p. 36).² Being well intentioned may not suffice to avoid such partisanship, as our interests or routines may bias us to reject unfavorable opinions and arguments as exhibiting unreason. This is a reason for thinking twice before lumping together the mistakes you perceive in your adversary, and generically qualify his position as irrational.

For instance, you may be convinced that populist parties represent the pits of unreason. But, as Lanius has shown for the AfD, they also present arguments and so it would be reasonable to agree with them where these arguments are convincing. Similarly for Brexiteers and other populists. This doesn't mean that you join them; it may even be far removed from that. But it does mean, that in many cases, the combat metaphor – suggesting that you're with us or against us – is inappropriate. It suffices to oppose your interlocutors on those issues where you disagree with them.

In the case of Trump a combat metaphor seems out of place as well. Although he sells us a lot of bullshit (Kristiansen and Kaussler 2018), and engages in trolling (see for an example, Tumulty 2019), sometimes he really argues (above we gave an example of this). So it could be reasonable to let him convince you on some points. At other points you may strongly oppose him.

The same holds for adherents of weird conspiracy theories and other crackpot views. After all there are also real conspiracies and views that were once considered outlandish but have later gained acceptance. The appropriate mode for a reasonable opposition will not be to go into combat against such theories collectively but to judge each theory on its merits. Then, even if you and your opponent are in fairly deep disagreement, and you need to oppose what in your view is a really crackpot theory, there may still be ways to do so by argument, given that normally you both share some concepts and in some sense value reasoning (See Aikin 2013, Section 5).

2. The metalinguistic tools of argumentation theory can be co-opted and deployed as tactical tricks with which to attempt to win the day, instead of as tools for relatively impartial analysis and evaluation (Aikin and Talisse 2019, pp. 183–4). For example, one can appropriate the concept of *ad hominem* fallacy, not in order to repair alleged discussion flaws, but just to attack and disqualify one's political opponents. They refer to this problem also as an *Owl of Minerva Problem* (p. 185).

It seems then that to use a martial metaphor like “combating unreason” would be inappropriate or at least unnecessary (cf. Cohen 1995; Govier 1999, Chapter 4 and 14) and perhaps itself leading to a kind of unreason. Going around and blaming others for presenting “fake news” or “committing this or that fallacy” or “bullshitting” might create more heat than light, unless such claims are carefully underpinned. They could amount to no more than an unfair blaming strategy (Van Laar and Krabbe 2016). Certainly, it would be wrong to conceive of humanity as divided in two parties: the reasonable “us” and the unreasonable “they.” Typically, everyone is sometimes reasonable and sometimes not. The whole combat metaphor, with its unnecessary military flavor, had better be dropped.

But what then can we do when we honestly perceive ourselves to be confronted by unreason?

Actually, there is quite a lot we can do. There is not just one solution, but a tool-kit full of ways to deal with particular kinds of situations. Psychology, sociology, and many other disciplines have contributions to offer. In this paper, we want to contribute to the tool-kit from the perspective of argumentation theory. From that angle, we want to investigate in what directions we can go beyond the rules for reasonable discussion (such as the Code of Conduct for critical discussion, van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004) to confront the surge of unreason.

4. Ways to react to cases of presumed unreason

What to do? It all depends on context! But let us discuss four characteristic types of situation that may occur in direct dialogical interaction, and see what the options are when you aim to support your side of a disagreement yet at the same time to change the conversational setting so as to move towards overall reasonableness.

4.1 Dealing with isolated fallacies

You and your interlocutor are involved in a *persuasion dialogue*. That is, you both exchange arguments and critical considerations, within a dialogue that counts as a shared attempt to resolve your disagreements on the merits of both sides. The conversational contributions of your interlocutor provide no reason whatsoever to suppose that he or she wants to quit the persuasion dialogue. But then you notice that your interlocutor commits a fallacy by violating, willingly or unwillingly, a norm that is part of the very idea of resolving disagreements on the merits.

For instance, it could be that your interlocutor commits a Straw Man Fallacy, or a Fallacy of Loaded Terms. Very unfair. Following the pragma-dialectical analy-

sis of these fallacies, the interlocutor either violates the Rule for Critical Discussion according to which any critical response should genuinely relate to the commitments of the other party rather than to some distorted or fictitious version of it (Straw Man Fallacy), or the Rule for Critical Discussion according to which a defense should not falsely pretend to be based on shared starting points (Fallacy of Loaded Terms, as we think it can be understood within the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies). What can you do if you want to support your side but also to redirect the course of dialogue into a more proper direction?

Acting reasonably, in our dialogical framework, implies that one is acting in such a way that the outcome of the dialogue will do full justice to the reasons available to the participants. When you become aware that your interlocutor commits a fallacy, your commitment to reason implies that you should, if possible, react in such a way as to avoid that this norm violation will impair the quality of the dialogue's outcome. As said, it all depends. Possibly, in your assessment there's no need to discuss the fallacy, as it will probably have no effect whatsoever, say because it concerns a minor issue, or because the addressees (you yourself or the attending audience) will not be led astray by it.

But then, possibly, leaving the fallacy untouched may have a distorting effect, in which case it needs to be defused. Otherwise, when one leaves the fallacy untouched, the fallacy may bias the outcome, or one may convey (inadvertently) the message that future fallacies will be left unchallenged as well. As we are not dealing, for now, with a setting in which the interlocutor systematically tries to exploit fallacies, but rather with a setting in which a presumably isolated, but noteworthy, fallacy occurs, we recommend to raise a point of order (Hamblin 1970) by identifying the contribution at hand, and by assessing it as a breach of an important norm for argumentative exchanges. Initiating such a *metadialogue* (Krabbe 2003) can be done in a blunt, insensitive, and arrogant manner – so that the fallacy charge puts the required spirit of cooperation at risk. But this is an issue of presentation and style, since there are also ways to express a fallacy charge with elegance, respect, and modesty. Thus, our recommendation would be that, if you need to bring up a charge of fallacy, you will do so in a rhetorically efficient way, so as to increase the likelihood that you and your interlocutor will come to agree either that the contribution was indeed fallacious or that, on the contrary, your fallacy charge cannot be sustained. After having made the necessary retractions, both of you should then return to the *ground level dialogue* as soon as possible.

(2) Very high levels of intelligence

“In a wide-ranging interview, President Donald Trump confronted why he's voiced skepticism on a climate change report issued over the Thanksgiving Day weekend, telling the Washington Post “I don't see” the devastating climate change effects warned about in the report. “One of the problems [is] that a lot

of people like myself, we have very high levels of intelligence, but we're not necessarily such believers," the president said of climate change. "You look at our air and our water and it's right now at a record clean." The 1,600-page National Climate Assessment, issued by the Trump administration, details the climate and economic impacts U.S. residents will see if drastic action is not taken to address climate change." (Hayes 2018)

Trump can be seen as violating the pragma-dialectical Relevance Rule for critical discussion according to which one should advance argumentation relevant to one's standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p.192) – because he appeals rather to his high level of intelligence than to substantial evidence or relevant expertise (a tactics known as the Ethical Fallacy or the *argumentum ad verecundiam*). Hayes's response can well be understood as criticizing Trump's inadmissible appeal to his personal qualities, but he does so in quite a detached and subtle manner by pointing to the contrast between Trump's personal estimation of the extent of climate change, and that of the National Climate Assessment's estimation issued by Trump's own administration. Hayes's approach seems adequate for dealing with occasional fallacies, and even if one may wonder whether it works in the case of Trump,³ a similar approach of carefully expressed criticism could be helpful in discussion with others about Trump's argument or in other cases of rule violation.

4.2 Dealing with alternative views on rules

Another way in which the contributions of your interlocutor may strike you as unreasonable, is when you notice that he tries to change the rules of game, or the way you presumed the rules were to be understood in the context at hand, and thereby to modify for the occasion the very idea of resolving disagreements on the merits (yet without going so far as to abandon the idea of obtaining a resolution by argumentation altogether).

For example, your interlocutor may flesh out "relevant to" in the Relevance Rule differently than you do. Or he may dismiss what you presumed to constitute a *prima facie* reliable kind of source of information – the press, climate science – as overall biased and untrustworthy, so that his specification of the idea of an "appropriate argument scheme," a key concept in the Argument Scheme Rule,⁴ differs from what could be expected when commencing the dialogue.

3. It probably won't.

4. According to the Argument Scheme Rule, standpoints may be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation not presented as based on formally conclusive reasoning, only if the defense does take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are correctly applied (see van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p.194).

We recommend taking issue with your interlocutor on his views on the rules of the game, and to try to sort out collectively at a metalevel to what extent these are acceptable for both of you, and to do so even when your interlocutor, in a domineering manner, tries to present his views of the rules as obviously called for in the present context, rather than as a proposal to be discussed. Each proponent of a thesis who wants to propose an interpretation of the procedural rules must make sure that the addressee (the opponent) accepts that interpretation, given that argumentation can only be rationally convincing when starting from the (substantial and procedural) concessions of the addressee. But note that it may not be in the interest of reason if the addressee just clings to the rules as she has presumed and liked them. Such conservatism only counts as reasonable if it is or could be successfully defended in a metadialogue about the proponent's proposed interpretation. Acting reasonably also means acting according to a defensible dialogical procedure. Reason cannot be a monolith, and proposed procedural adaptations can sometimes withstand critical testing in an open-minded inquiry or a cooperative persuasion dialogue.

(3) **Big political agenda**

"WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID "Look, scientists also have a political agenda."

Asked about scientists who say hurricanes and other extreme weather events are worsening, Mr. Trump replied, "You'd have to show me the scientists because they have a very big political agenda."

THE FACTS

Scientists dispute that.

No doubt climate change has become politicized. And climate skeptics Sunday night cheered Mr. Trump's remark. But scientists took umbrage at the notion that their research has an agenda. Here are three in their own words:

Katharine Hayhoe, climate scientist, Texas Tech University: "A thermometer isn't Democrat or Republican. It doesn't give us a different answer depending on how we vote."

Andrew Dessler, climate scientist, Texas A&M University: "At its heart, this is just a wacky conspiracy theory," he wrote. "It's important to realize that there's never been a conspiracy by a huge field of science. And this would have to be an extremely massive conspiracy, considering the thousands of scientists working on this. On the other hand, there have been many examples (cigarettes, anyone?) where political advocates have tried to cast doubt on science that is extremely solid. That's what's going on here."

Donald Wuebbles, climate scientist, University of Illinois: "No scientists have political agendas. That's just an excuse." (Friedman 2018)

The response by Hayhoe, though not incorrect, is weak since it is not very responsive to any considerations that might motivate an abandonment of appeals to the expertise of climate scientists. The response by Wuebbles might even be seen as scientific stonewalling. The response by Dessler misfires since it seems that Trump develops his stance without committing himself to there being any conspiracy by scientists – climate scientists might collectively have been led astray due to wrong incentives and social biases rather than by deliberate scheming. Yet, a response similar to Dessler's but pointing to the mutual criticisms among scientists and the self-correcting mechanisms within science rather than to the unlikelihood of conspiracies, could provide a reasonable and convincing argument against the very idea that in general climate scientists are too politically driven to be taken seriously, and thereby support, also in the field of climate science, the *prima facie* reliability of arguments from expert opinion. In general, if your interlocutor tries to make a change in the mutually presupposed rules of the game it won't help to give a reply that is unresponsive to his motives, stonewalling, or just misfiring. The royal road is to settle the issue at a metalevel, though again one may again wonder how well it would work with Trump.

4.3 Dealing with shifts to other dialogue types

Suppose you are, or thought you were, involved in a persuasion dialogue, but you start to doubt whether your interlocutor isn't trying to shift to some other type of dialogue (see Walton and Krabbe 1995, esp. pp.100–116). Such a shift away from a persuasion dialogue may be a *licit*, rather than an *illicit*, shift, provided that the interlocutor does not conceal her attempt to shift but instead invites you to accept a proposal to turn to another type of dialogue, and thus in no way suggests that he succeeded in convincing you of his standpoint in the persuasion dialogue.

The parties may decide to postpone their persuasion dialogue but first turn to another type of dialogue in order to profit from the results of the latter, so that this other dialogue will be functionally embedded in the persuasion dialogue. For example, your interlocutor may catch you up on the news within an *information seeking dialogue*, before returning to the critical probing of the persuasion dialogue. Or, the two of you may try to find the correct answer to an open (undisputed) question within an *inquiry* – “what's the expected sea level rising by 2040?” – or to decide on a practical issue within a *deliberation dialogue* – “when will we set the deadline for the next National Climate Assessment?” – before resuming the argumentative exchange. Further, you may try to come to a compromise agreement on some disputed issue in a *negotiation dialogue* before taking up the persuasion dialogue: “If you accept my definition of *green* then I'd be willing to accept your definition of *economically competitive*.”

It is even possible, we think, that the parties licitly shift to an *eristic dialogue* – the kind of dialogue, such as a polemic altercation or a quarrel, which starts from a conflict and aims at no more than a reshaped relationship, such as a reshuffled intellectual or emotional hierarchy. Such a common dialogical goal still provides its participants with, admittedly minimal, norms for evaluating their contributions. Typically, one is allowed here to be quite impolite, to exploit rhetorical tricks, and to exert some emotional pressure. But within limits, beyond which contributions count as unseemly intimidation, harassment, or coercion. One requirement for eristic dialogue is that it be consensual, and that there is still some minimal level of mutual trust and cooperation. It is difficult to keep eristic dialogue under control, and clearly, it borders on unreason.

We recommend that you and your interlocutor take some time out to discuss in what type of dialogue you want to proceed. If, for instance, your interlocutor wants to negotiate, you may either agree or insist on first trying persuasion dialogue; if he wants to have some fun instead of serious discussion, you may go along or insist on seriousness. You may be lenient, for example, when some climate skeptic (not necessarily the president of the United States) teases you:

(4) **A big fat dose of global warming**

[Trump twitters:] “It’s really cold outside, they are calling it a major freeze, weeks ahead of normal. Man, we could use a big fat dose of global warming!”

(Cillizza 2017)

This ridicules the opposition and would be no good in a serious persuasion dialogue,⁵ yet it can also be seen as shifting towards an eristic dialogue. It would be a waste of time to deal with this as something that needs serious refutation. Better to see it as a joke and respond in kind, or else to refuse to go along in that direction and insist on the importance of seriously discussing the issue of global heating.

4.4 Dealing with abandonment of reasonable dialogue

You begin to believe, or you even perceive, that your interlocutor is not, or no longer, committed to reason, because of a continual use of fallacies, bullshitting, acts of trolling, and outright lies, in such a way that you cannot even interpret your interlocutor’s behavior as an attempt to make a licit shift to eristic dialogue. Apparently, he prefers verbal chaos to considerate reflection (possibly commissioned or manipulated by foreign outsiders). Therefore you are in doubt about the possibility of any serious dialogue with this interlocutor.

5. See on ‘lost in the laugh,’ Fearnside and Holther (1959).

One option is to initiate a metadialogue about the nature of the interlocutor's previous more reasonable contributions (if any), and convince him or her to adopt or return to a kind of exchange in which you collaborate towards a reasonable outcome of some specific kind (a somewhat different kind of metadialogue than that in Krabbe 2003). Such a response fits the golden standard, yet chances are slim that it will make your interlocutor adopt or return to a more reasonable attitude. What is more, it requires an analytic approach, which may annoy members of your audience who perceive your expostulation as tiresome and pedantic. It even may be counterproductive by taking the bait and spending one's attention to a message that distracts from, or disrupts, the debate about the real issues (cf. on the advice "not to feed the trolls," Cohen 2017).

A second option to be taken seriously is to retort in kind, so as to give the interlocutor an incentive to adopt or to return to a more reasonable attitude, in which case you follow suit (van Laar and Krabbe 2016; see also Jacobs 2009). You can use such a tit-for-tat strategy to communicate the message that it is expedient for your interlocutor to return to a reasonable dialogue – in which case you only *seem* simply to retort in kind, whereas, on another level you really try to commence a metadialogue. However that may be, if, to your regret, your interlocutor decides to retaliate the battle is on and the dialogue off.

Thirdly, one may, more or less ostensibly, ignore the interlocutor's withdrawal from reasonable dialogue, and act as if the two of you are still engaged in a reasonable exchange. You can explain to your interlocutor at what points you remain unconvinced, and what faults he commits in the dialectic, yet without provoking him by labeling his behavior as exemplifying unreason. In this way, you may entice him to follow your good example, or you may at least put across your message to an audience of onlookers.⁶ Of course, you could fail to be persuasive after all, and onlookers might mistake your tolerance as a failure to stand your ground.

6. In Cohen's view, ignoring internet trolling can be an argumentative virtue despite its being disrespectful to the troll, because giving trolls the floor may turn out to be disrespectful to other arguers and their arguments (Cohen 2017). Tumulty (2019) provides an example. After the publication of Mueller's report about Russian interference in the 2016 election and Trump's alleged obstruction of the ensuing investigations, Trump held that any collusion had been proved to be a mere delusion. In the following tweet, he alluded to an idea vented by a supporter, that two years should be added to his first term as a president: "they have stolen two years of my (our) Presidency (Collusion Delusion) that we will never be able to get back." According to Tumulty, by trying to refute the tweet's message, one would follow Trump in turning away one's attention from the published results of Mueller's report. Ignoring unreasonable moves can be used as part of a strategy of de-escalating a dysfunctional public sphere, especially when parties are so distrustful of each other that they regard any serious engagement with the other side as a concession to that side, which pollutes their own position (Aikin and Talisse 2019, Chapter 14).

4.5 Dealing with fake news and bullshit

Let us briefly discuss the terms ‘fake news’ and bullshit’ before we determine how they fit the options discussed above.

Habgood-Coote provides convincing reasons for academics, philosophers, politicians, and activists to eschew the pejorative term “fake news” (2019).⁷ Yet, disputants *charge* each other with presenting fake news, so there still is a bona fide employment for the term, even if it were not part of one’s preferred theoretical lingo. We understand a charge of fake news as the critique that your adversary circulates false or misleading information as being news, thus trying to mislead an audience (cf. Gelfert 2018).

We think that, in the following passage, the White House is being charged with fake news, even though the term is not used:

(5) Largest audience, period

“The Washington Post counted 3,251 false or misleading claims by the president from his first day in office through this May, while former White House press secretary Sean Spicer will forever be remembered for the most bizarre falsehood of Trump’s inaugural weekend, when he declared from the lectern of the press room that the new president had enjoyed “the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period.”” (Lozada 2018)

Declaring bizarre falsehoods from the lectern of the White House’s pressroom surely fits any definition of fake news, so we can see this passage as including a charge of fake news.

According to Harry Frankfurt, *bullshit* is a deceptive form of speech. Bullshit is phony, but not necessarily false, speech that is unconcerned with the truth-values of what is stated (Frankfurt 2005, p. 47). Bullshit is deceptive given that the bullshitter hides that “the motive guiding and controlling [the bullshitter’s speech] is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are” (p. 55).⁸ Bullshit can be used for political purposes, such as manipulating the opinions of others, eroding democratic norms, or thwarting the FBI’s investigation of Trump’s ties with the Russians, (Kristiansen and Kaussler 2018). We think that the following passage, contiguous with the passage in Example 5, refers to a specific specimen of bullshitting:

7. He considers them epistemic slur terms that we don’t need, and that are propagandistic.

8. Contrary to the liar, the bullshitter is wholly unconcerned with truth and does not deliberately promulgate a proposition he himself presumes to be false.

(6) **Alternative facts**

"[...] it was White House counselor Kellyanne Conway, defending Spicer the next day, who captured this presidency's postmodernist project, suggesting that her colleague had merely offered "alternative facts" about the inauguration.

Spicer's lie was conventional, an effort to have us believe something specific that is not true. Conway's framing went further, granting us permission to believe whatever alternative we prefer – and therefore to believe nothing at all."

(Lozada 2018)

Conway's suggestion conveys a lack of concern for the distinction between true and false, by going so far as to upgrade a falsehood to the status of an alternative fact.

We want to see how charges of fake news and of bullshit fit our four situations sketched above. First take the charge of fake news. From the viewpoint of the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies, a charge of fake news can be seen as the charge that the interlocutor smuggles in a controversial proposition, thereby violating the first part of the Starting Point Rule: "A party may not falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point [...]" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p.193). In the informal logic approach, such charges can be seen as charges that the interlocutor advances a proposition that is unacceptable without defense and yet remains undefended – in short, the fallacy of *Problematic Premise* (Johnson and Blair 1983, p.77). If you charge someone with fake news, this may result in a metadialogical examination into the admissibility of the contribution at hand. But it can also provoke the interlocutor into raising a fallacy charge in return, possibly charging you in turn with having presented fake news – "look who's talking!"⁹ In effect, a salient use of the term "fake news" is that of attempting to shield oneself against charges of presenting lies and deceptive information as being news, i.e. charges of presenting "fake news."

A charge of bullshitting, we think, more plausible is a charge to the effect that the interlocutor fails to display the kind of motivation that is required to engage in any critical discussion or serious deliberation, rather than a charge that one specific rule for critical discussion or deliberation has been transgressed. Thus, such a charge targets either a shift to some other type of dialogue, such as maybe an eristic dialogue, or more plausibly an abandonment of any reasonable dialogue. In Example 6, such a charge has been raised against Conway, be it without using the derogatory epithet "bullshit." The author may thus prepare the ground for the interlocutor's return to reason, either directly by trying to put across the message

9. Such charges of fake news exemplify *tu quoque* arguments, running the risk of being *tu quoque* fallacies.

that such a return is desirable, or else indirectly, by educating the audience at large and by creating a social setting in which bullshitting is understood for what it is.

Charges of fake news or bullshitting may themselves display unreason, and constitute *undermining propaganda*, in the sense of undermining ideals, in this case the ideal of truthfulness, by insincerely appealing to these ideals while merely seeming to embody them (Stanley 2015). Such charges may seem to appeal to the ideal of truth and critical inquiry but function merely to disqualify one's political opponents as legitimate participants in the public sphere.

(7) **Personal insults**

"In her slim, impassioned book "The Death of Truth," former New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani is less circumspect, aiming a fusillade of literary allusions and personal insults at the president. Trump is an "over-the-top avatar of narcissism, mendacity, ignorance, prejudice, boorishness, demagoguery, and tyrannical impulses (not to mention someone who consumes as many as a dozen Diet Cokes a day) ... some manic cartoon artist's mashup of Ubu Roi, Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, and a character discarded by Molière," she writes." (Lozada 2018)

In our view, the former book critic exemplifies such undermining propaganda because, though she seems to want to promote the cause of a truthful and inclusive public debate yet she depicts Trump as being unworthy on all counts to be a partner in any such endeavor.

Instead of trying to exclude your supposedly unreasonable opponent from the debate you can analyze his tactics in a much more insightful and educational way, as the following passage suggests:

(8) **Just win**

"Trump's falsehoods can seem arbitrary at times, emerging in early-morning tweets cribbed from cable news or in digressions spewed at some endless rally. Yet there is a method to the mendacity, which conservative political commentator Amanda Carpenter unpacks neatly in her book "Gaslighting America."

If you track some of Trump's most notorious lies, you'll recognize the steps, Carpenter explains. Step 1: "Stake a claim" on a fringe issue that few people want to touch. Step 2: "Advance and deny" – that is, put the falsehood into circulation, but don't own it. (This is Trump's "people are saying" phase.) Third, "create suspense" by promising new evidence or revelations, even if they never appear. Fourth, "discredit the opponent" with attacks on motive or character. And fifth, just win – "Trump declares victory, no matter the circumstances." (Lozada 2018, referring to Carpenter 2018)

The political commentator is educating the citizenry about the nature and dangers of unreason, and seems to genuinely contribute to a kind of setting where unreason can be tamed more easily, without in any way undermining the kind of setting for a truthful and inclusive public debate.

Thus, there are degrees of unreason, and several reasonable ways to respond to them. Yet, it is clear that none of these ways provides anything close to a guarantee for success.

5. Conclusion

There is reason for a moderate optimism, which may encourage us to further investigate the merits of various critical reactions to cases of presumed unreason. But in this we should avoid to fall prey to the pitfall of considering our difficulties with presumed unreason so unprecedented and exceptional that these would justify “the reasonable us” to enter into a combat using all and any means to beat “the unreasonable they”. Instead, we listed a number of situations in which one may come to suspect that the interlocutor is unreasonable, to some degree. For each of these situations we discussed at least one way to respond to the interlocutor that is critical and promotes an exchange of reasons. But then, in line with our adherence to the idea that reasonable dialogue is inquisitive, and that one’s own contributions should never be immune from criticism, it is no surprise that we have been unable to find any response that can be expected to settle the matter and to do away with unreason in general. In sum, when unreason seems ubiquitous, reasonable discussion may not be a panacea, but will still be a pertinent asset, worthwhile to be studied in dialectical argumentation theory.

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Address for correspondence

Erik C. W. Krabbe
 Faculty of Philosophy
 University of Groningen
 Oude Boteringestraat 52
 9712 GL Groningen
 The Netherlands
e.c.w.krabbe@rug.nl

Co-author information

Jan Albert van Laar
 Faculty of Philosophy
 University of Groningen
j.a.van.laar@rug.nl