Disinformation and the Pandemic: The "Treacherous" Virus of Fake News

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Abstract

The pandemic represents a global emergency that has a profound impact on the lives of citizens. The contraction of spaces for personal freedom and the suspension of certain rights have altered the relationship between citizens and institutions, further modifying and weakening the dimension of the public sphere. This inherently unstable dimension is further weakened by a policy that exploits disintermediation for a construction of power based on the cancellation of the process of the acquisition of knowledge to leave space for the dynamics of polarisation and public opinion based on misinformation. The ongoing pandemic crisis represents a factor of profound destabilisation because it has exacerbated the phenomena already underway. Social distancing and physical immobility have definitively moved the construction of public discourse on the network, thus giving life to what is called platform society, where platforms produce the social structures in which we live (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Keywords: disinformation, pandemic, social media.

1. Media and disinformation

An ideal starting point for this dissertation on how profound impact disinformation has on social dynamics in this pandemic era is a well-known quote from Gawker Media founder Nick Denton[1]: "It's all out there. Half is true, half is false. And you don't know which half is which". The phenomenon of fake news was not born due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but these crises of

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[1] "Gawker Media founder Nick Denton has filed for personal bankruptcy in the wake of Paypal billionaire Peter Thiel's proxy war against the news organization and its individual journalists". (2016, August 01).
https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/aug/01/nick-denton-personal-bankruptcy-gawker-media-founder.

global dimensions show us, in all their true essence, the meaning of the word *globalisation* and its impact on all areas of social life and, above all, on communication flows and on the evolution of the media system.

From the fifties of the 20th century through to today, context has become increasingly critical. The result is that media have continued to carry out a catalyst action unable to convey high values, but rather being a mirror of society – a drift that the advent of social media has exacerbated. The principle of cultural uniformity and a unified audience have been strengthened as a result of the penetrating force of the disinformation system (Pira, 2020).

This era of multidimensionality, which also nourishes all the major players in the media world, makes it clear how much the environment in which our social actions develop has changed.

We inhabit overlapping, intersecting places that are an expression of communities, groups within which we move, giving life to a universe of subcultures. The question is: which places are we talking about?

Parisier (2011) argues "The bubble of filters relegates us to our information ghetto, without allowing us to see or explore the huge world of possibilities that exist online. Network developers need to find a balance between relevance and casual discovery, between the pleasure of seeing friends and the excitement of meeting new people, amidst comfortable niches and open spaces" (p. 179).

The everyday has turned into an infosphere where the subjectivation of reality prevails over the process of objectification. Personal detachment from reality that should favour the triggering of processes of internalisation and the construction of individual thought has failed.

Ong (1982) identifies three main directions in which writing, the phonetic alphabet and printing develop and enhance the human word as a means of social relationship. He intended it as the ability to store information in the form of documents. The ability to transmit messages remotely, and the ability to reproduce and disseminate messages to a larger number of recipients. For this to happen, however, it is necessary that the word is fixed, crystallised, separated from its natural context, depersonalised, and separated from its author.

But in the era of platformization, platforms lead us to build social relationships based on aggregative processes rather than on a rational thought that passes through processes of abstraction and objectification of reality.

In a society that changes rapidly, transforming itself day by day, the hoaxes of the web have become a very serious problem. Fake news represents a great enemy of media credibility and the engine of post-truth, and it is not a random or episodic phenomenon. Several studies and research show that fake news is used to attack three cornerstones of democracy: politics, science and economics (Bauman, 2002, 2006, 2012, 2016; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Morozov, 2011; Parisier, 2011; Quattrociocchi & Vicini, 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018).

In the volume *Giornalismi* (Pira & Altinier, 2108), we have drawn a model, which we have defined as the 'fake news hexagon', to identify those characteristics that make fake news a "weapon of mass disinformation". In particular, they show some characteristics:

Figure 1. Exagon of Fake News.
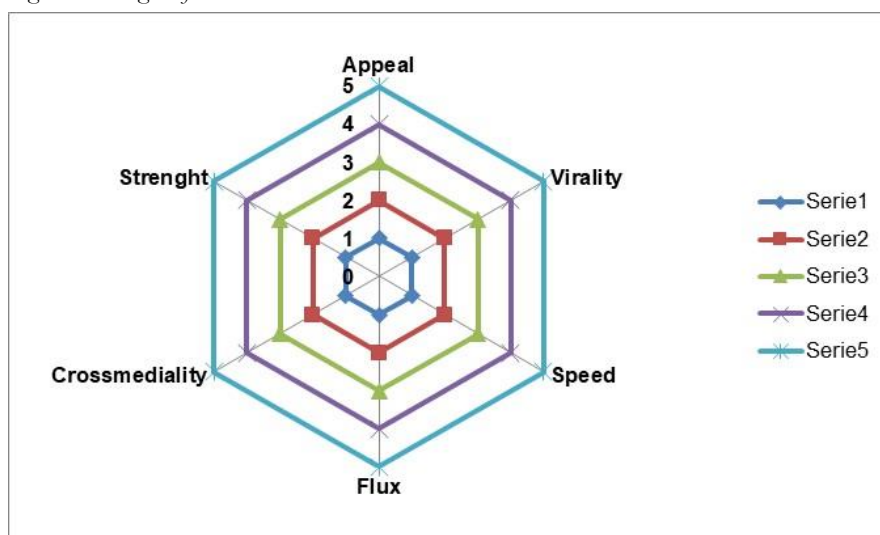
Source: Pira & Altinier (2018, p. 95).

Appeal: The mechanism of attraction and distortion of the *agenda setting.* An apparent contrast between journalism and SNS companies. Big news broadcasts take advantage of apps and algorithms developing an *agenda setting* in line with people's tendencies.

Virality: The proliferation of informational cascades makes it easy for fake news to be relaunched through the web. They also remain in digital environments. This demonstrates how difficult it can be to identify them and to unmask the misinformation because it blurs the boundaries between fact and opinion.

Speed: Exploiting speed is a key element in the connection and in the way in which communication processes are implemented in digitalised society. The distortionary power of disintermediation.

Flow: *Fake news* represents a flow. A set of information spreads to demonstrate a thesis or to direct public opinion towards a position that does not reflect reality.

Cross-media: This kind of news is capable of being transversal and of crossing different media platforms. News posted on Facebook is immediately relaunched by other media.

Strength: The Business of Social Manipulation. "Cyber troops use a variety of communication strategies to disseminate computational propaganda over social media platforms. They create their own content, including fake videos, blogs, memes, pictures, or news websites. These content strategies involve more than simply posting forum comments or replying to genuine user posts, but instead are important sources of junk news, and conspiratorial or polarizing information that can be used to support a broader manipulation campaign" (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 4).

Thus, false news and disinformation both exploit the dynamics of the circulation of information flow on the Net to penetrate the various nodes and to take advantage of the cascade effect that social platforms favour. In this sense, it can be defined as the instrumental and manipulative use of information to give life to a specific narrative and vision of the world, as information without any relevance to reality but with manipulative intent. Speed and cross-mediality mean that fake news, placed in the vortex of new communication, have a weight and a capacity to produce enormously greater damage today even more so, compared to any other historical moment. As an example of their strength and impact, we can mention the platforms dedicated to instant messaging, such as Whatsapp and Telegram, where, in a short time, the news becomes viral and impossible to stop. In such context, the process of debunking becomes increasingly difficult to be implemented, since a lot of news is perfectly constructed, and a great effort are needed to unmask the deception (Pira & Altinier 2018).

Fake news poses a threat of influencing the construction of the collective imagination because, as Lippman (1922) stated, "we do not see what our eyes are not used to considering. We are struck, sometimes consciously, more often without knowing it, from those facts that fit our philosophy", that is, "a series of more or less organised images to describe the world that is not seen" (p. 146). It is clear today that social networks combine to form this interpretation and overlap with a function performed in the past only by classical media. And it is in this process that fake news confirms itself as a dangerous instrument because "what the individual does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on images that are formed or given to him" (p.186). Fake news, however, before being a hoax, represent for those who are communication professionals, uncontrolled news. In this sense, fake news is a threat not only to the credibility of the media but also, and above all, to the reputation of companies or

institutions. It is true that today false information lurks everywhere, but there is certainly a deficit in the control of sources and contents (Lippman, 1922).

2. The role of the media industry during the pandemic

In the globalised world, now overwhelmed by technology, which is believed to be invincible, no one would have imagined that the fate of the planet would have totally changed due to a killer virus whose origins are still unknown. In the first phase in Italy, from February to early March 2020, scientists explained that we did not have to worry, that nothing would happen, that everything was under control, because basically we were dealing with a simple flu or similar (Pira, 2020). Then, there was a change of course. It became clear that the world was experiencing something much more serious and that scientists had no solutions for a completely different epidemic. There were no answers. The confrontation between the scientists themselves was fluctuating. Distant comparisons exploded which seemed to reflect not a different assessment of the pandemic, but of real clashes within the scientific community.

Figure 2. Trust in the Institutions.

Trust in the Institutions How much trust do you have in the following organizations, associations, social groups, institutions? *(% values of those who said they had "a lot or very much" confidence net of nonresponse Comparison with 2019, 2018 and 2009)*					
	2020	2019	2018	2009	Differences 2020-2019
Law Enforcement	69	73	72	71	-4
The Pope*	67	66	72	54	1
President of Republic**	58	55	56	70	3
School	52	54	54	58	-2
Municipality	43	38	38	44	5
Church	42	38	38	53	4
European Union	39	34	33	49	5
Judiciary	39	36	42	41	3
Region	36	30	30	35	6
Association of entrepeneurs	34	24	29	26	10
the State	33	22	29	33	11
Syndacates (CGIL; CISL; UIL)***	25	23	23	24	2
Banks	23	19	21	19	4
Parlamient	23	15	19	18	8
Parties	9	9	8	9	0
*2020,2019 and 2018 Jorge Mario Bergoglio; 2009 Joseph Alosius Ratzinger					
** 2020,2019 and 2018 Sergio Mattarella; 2009 Giorgio Napolitano					
*** In 2009 the figure was collected separately for CGIL and CISL -UIL. The prposed figure is an average between the two data					
Source: survey DEMOS for Repubblica - December 20201 (sample: 1002 cases)					

Source: Demos Survey, December 2021

All this has weighed heavily on public opinion, generating a dangerous situation of an infodemic. Both institutions and the world of politics have contributed to this climate of uncertainty, with often contradictory statements. We were facing a situation that persevered, and that had led to, a crisis in the authority of the experts, generating a felling of distrust towards politics, while institutions continued to be a solid reference point for Italian citizens, as demonstrated by the survey conducted in December 2021 by Demos.

In this context the role of communication agencies has contributed to fuelling a climate of uncertainty and fear. The latest Censis report provided a clear picture of it. For 49.7% of Italians, the communication of the media on the epidemic was confusing, 39.5% felt anxious, and for 34.7% it was excessive. Only 13.9% thought that it had been balanced (Censis, 2021).

The information gap increased. Since the confusion caused by communicative bulimia has affected everyone, the web remains the privileged environment in which misinformation and false news have been produced and developed: 29 million Italians declared that during the health emergency period they had come across news on the web that turned out to be false or wrong (Censis, 2021).

It is clear that fake news also deconstructs the credibility of social networks. There are many fake news stories that spread during the pandemic. Here a few examples:

- A group financed by Bill Gates has patented the COVID-19 virus;
- The COVID -19 virus is a biological weapon created by man;
- Garlic can cure COVID-19;
- Coronavirus vaccine modifies DNA.

The situation has become so serious that the president of Copasir, the Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Italian Republic, declared that the coronavirus pandemic "was at the centre of widespread online disinformation activity, in which state actors entered, with structured actors, who intend to manipulate the internal political debate, influencing international geopolitical balances, inciting the subversion of the social order and destabilising public opinion regarding the spread of the contagion and prevention and treatment measures" (Repubblica.it, 2020, May 26).

The President of the United States of America, Joe Biden, also expressed his position on disinformation, and against social media that allow disinformation on COVID-19. As reported by CNBC, Biden attacked Facebook and other social platforms. Asked what his message was to platforms like Facebook regarding COVID-19 disinformation, Biden said "They're killing

people." "Look, the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated, and that's − they're killing people," Biden said on the South Lawn of the White House (Cnbc.com, 2021 July 17).

Even the Surgeon General of the United States, Vivek Murthy, stated against disinformation and he declared that: "misinformation as having hindered vaccination efforts, sown mistrust, caused people to reject public health measures, use unproven treatments, prolonged the pandemic and put lives at risk" (AbcNews.com, 2021 July 15).

In short, the White House wanted Facebook and other social networks to be much more careful and eliminate posts that advise people not to get vaccinated. As expected, Facebook rejected all accusations, underlining the commitment of the entire staff (The Hill, 2021 July).

So, Facebook, on 18 August 2021, published its first "Widely Viewed Content Report" – a report that makes known the most viewed posts, links, and pages in the News Feed from April to June 2021. Menlo Park guaranteed that this document would be updated every three months and, if for that moment it only concerned US users, in the near future it would be extended to the rest of the world. The New York Times revealed that: "Facebook had prepared a similar report for the first three months of the year, but executives never shared it with the public because of concerns that it would look bad for the company, according to internal emails sent by executives and shared with The New York Times. In that report, a copy of which was provided to *The Times*, the most-viewed link was a news article with a headline suggesting that the coronavirus vaccine was at fault for the death of a Florida doctor. The report also showed that a Facebook page for *The Epoch Times*, an anti-China newspaper that spreads right-wing conspiracy theories, was the nineteenth-most-popular page on the platform for the first three months of 2021" (NYTimes.com, 2021 August 20).

3. Conclusions

Thus, we have witnessed a fluctuating cycle of often contradictory information that has weighed heavily on people's lives, with an excessive amount of circulating information that made it difficult for people to understand what was happening and to locate reliable documents. We moved from *infodemic* to *psychodemic*[2], with people afraid and suffering of panic attacks.

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[2] An infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health (2020) https://www.who.int/health-

A climate of uncertainty related to vaccinations that has continued. In Italy an undisputed struggle was taking place between "no vax", "yes vax" and "ni vax" which was slowing down vaccinations and then the huge controversy against the green pass (green certification) which continued to divide public opinion.

The struggle against fake news can only be won with everyone's commitment. There is no doubt that the fake news market is fuelled by huge business that generates considerable earnings. It takes a great deal of energy to deal with disinformation, but we have to maintain an optimistic perspective and the results can be obtained with such care and extreme diligence.

On a global level, we are observing processes of the profound fragmentation of society. The Ipsos Social Cohesion Index (ISCI) detected in April 2021 highlights how social cohesion is under attack on a global level. The data collected by Ipsos in the survey, conducted on 20,000 adults in twenty-seven countries, shows how globally citizens consider their sense of social cohesion having been weakened (41%), compared to 21% who believe it is still solid.

Figure 3. Social Cohesion
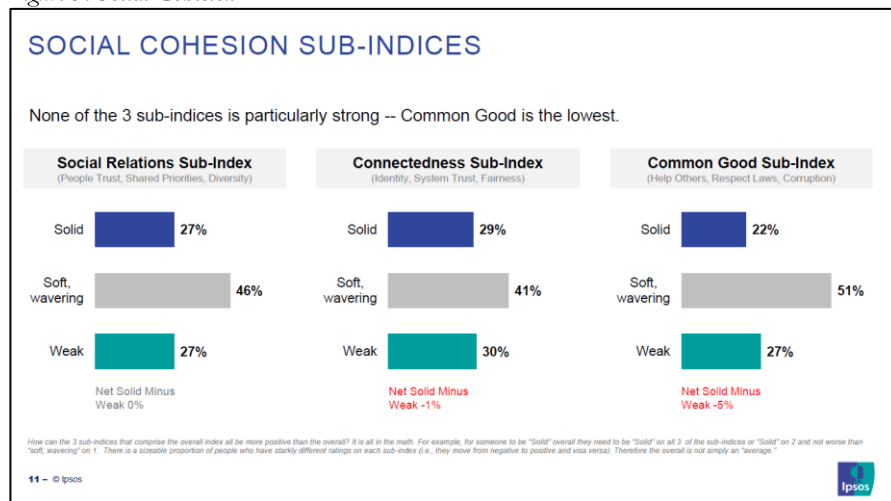
Source: Ipsos Survey, April 2021

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topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1. Chu R. (2020) "A psychodemic is a portmanteau for "psychological pandemic", an informal term that accurately describes the psychological aspects of the pandemic that are hindering our response to it. The psychodemic rests on three main pillars: misinformation, fatigue, and psychic numbing" https://www.endcoronavirus.org/blog/psychodemic-a-pandemic-of-the-minds

We are facing a challenge of global significance that must be addressed through a new autonomous construction of meaning (Castells, 2009). A process that is only possible so long as the relational dynamics and the construction of capacity for comparison on different opinions can prevail over perverse dynamics, as a result of the distorted use of confirmation bias and the hyper-generation of polarising effects.

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Web

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