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## THE PANDEMIC OF DISINFORMATION\*

**Introduction:** The continuing pandemic crisis represents a factor of profound destabilization, because it has exacerbated the phenomena already in place. In particular, social distancing, physical immobility have definitively shifted the construction of public discourse on the network, thus, giving rise to what is called “platform society”, where it is the platforms that produce the social structures in which we live.

**Research Aim:** The intervention intends to propose a reflection on how the processes of disinformation, accompanied by the crisis of authority of experts, propagated by a media system that increasingly feeds on information cascades and social propagation, have characterized the institutional communication at the time of the pandemic, its continued loss of authority, too often crushed between drifts induced by sub-politics and social dynamics. This narrative review is based on an analysis of the data collected from the empirical studies on the topic.

**Evidence-based Facts:** The reduction of the spaces of personal freedom, the suspension of rights, have altered the relationship between citizens and institutions, further modifying and weakening the dimension of the public sphere. These dynamics have profoundly altered the circulation patterns of online information that have influenced the choices of users.

**Summary:** The dynamics of proliferation of fake news, thanks to the strength of their cross-mediality, favor the entrenchment of polarized opinions that are consolidated thanks to a communicative construction centered on the feeling of fear.

**Keywords:** disinformation, vetrinization, hyper-connection, polarization, infodemia, manipulation, fake news.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and dramatically expanded disinformation processes. The manipulation of information and data has become a very critical threat with a deep impact on society and on young generations. Over the

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last two years, they have been widely exposed to web content, always connected, often left alone, they represent one of the most fragile segments of the society and those we urgently need to protect. Using platforms and social networks, we are witnessing a sort of mass window dressing that can lead to dangerous deviances. False profiles proliferate even among adolescents, demonstrating how in the liquid-modern era deception has become central to the processes of understanding reality, where the distinction between true and false is no longer perceived.

The context in which knowledge processes are formed has changed profoundly. The everyday has been transformed. Berger, in his analysis of the processes of social construction of reality, argued that learning about the reality of everyday life takes place within a framework of ordered, objective reality and that it is precisely the necessary objectification that enables individuals to give meaning to reality:

The reality of everyday life is organized around the “here” of my body and the “now” of my present. This “here and now” is the focus of my attention to the reality of everyday life. What is “here and now” presented to me in everyday life is the *realissimum* of my consciousness. The reality of everyday life is not, however, exhausted by these immediate presences, but embraces phenomena that are not present “here and now”. This means that I experience everyday life in terms of differing degrees of closeness and remoteness, both spatially and temporally. Closest to me is the zone of everyday life that is directly accessible to my bodily manipulation. This zone contains the world within my reach, the world in which I work. (1966, p. 36)

The everyday has turned into an infosphere (Floridi, 2017), from the objectification (Ong, 1982, p. 75) of reality we have moved to its subjectivation. The extremization of the mediatization process has cancelled in the perception of individuals the category of the real as defined by Berger. The process of objectification is not realized here, with the consequent personal detachment from reality that should favor the triggering of processes of internalization and the construction of individual thought (McLuhan, 1962, p. 102).

In the pre-digital era, the categories of verbal, written and visual communication made sense; in the digital society, these merge into a single new way of communicating that mixes all languages, creating a new expressivity that changes faster and faster, adapting itself to the new devices and defining itself through the applications and services of the technological operators, making even the concept of identity increasingly fluid, as it tends to adapt to the changing languages and the interconnections they generate.

## EVIDENCE-BASED REVIEW

**The era of global communication**

Even today, technology is not a process, it is not an instrument supporting the construction of knowledge. It remains opaque. The transparency that allows us to observe by developing critical sense is not realized.

The aspect of ethics is then the most delicate and full of implications. Disintermediation has deluded us that we can act without rules, convinced that we are at the center, endowed with power. “Electricity has reduced the globe to little more than a village and, bringing together all social and political functions with a sudden implosion, has dramatically increased awareness of human responsibility” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 11). I think it would be interesting to propose McLuhan’s vision of a nascent global village as a starting point. He observed the technological and social revolution still in its beginnings, proposing some concepts to reflect on:

- global village,
- implosion of social and political functions,
- the level of awareness of human responsibility.

The dimension of the global village traced by McLuhan is so relevant not only because for the first time he defined the impact of technology/electricity on human action, but it is even more so, if we consider the historical background, the globe was traversed by great conflicts and geopolitical and physical blocks. Precisely in relation to the historical situation, he shows us how the extensive use of technology and its evolution, due to the very function the “electric” media performed in society, led to an implosion of the political and social functions defined in the previous century. All of this results in the growing individual responsibility in the modification of social and cultural processes.

In this sense, McLuhan designed how the role of the individual in society was generating an increasing impact and, at the same time, how the changes induced by technology were acting on the individuals. A line of sociological investigation will be extensively explored, and Bauman is regarded as one of its greatest interpreters. He argues that we eliminate everything that is in discord with our feeling. And it opens to the concept of identity consumerism, which reminds us that living in the community is made up of hard work, confrontation, listening and mediation, which, however, opens up the greatest resource, the engine of civilization, i.e. knowledge (Bauman and Mauro, 2015). This dust is transformed into what Zuboff calls “the shadow text”, arguing that everything that is published, posted, or shared, as an apparent primary text is what “feeds” this second text. “In this our life experience is forced to become raw material to be accumulated and analysed for other people’s commercial purposes. [...] We are the objects of its narratives, and we are excluded from its lessons. We are the source that gives life to this treasure, but this text is about us, it is not for us. It is created, sustained, and exploited outside our awareness for the benefit of others” (2019, pp. 199–200).

I find the parallel between Bauman's premonitory and Zuboff's interesting visions because it introduces us to the theme of the dynamics through which learning develops. Both of them, from different points of view, show us how the community disintegration is dissolving those antibodies that allowed individuals, capable of aggregating for common purposes, to fight oppressive drives and give impetus to the growth of society. Narcissistic tendencies, the performative ego, and hyper-consumerism are giving rise to a different social order, which places what Zuboff calls "the division of learning" in the centre. In this sense, those who hold the power of data can unilaterally decide what constitutes knowledge, what kind of learning underlies the ability to make decisions. As Han argues: "In hyper-communication everything is mixed up with everything. Even the boundaries between inside and outside become more permeable. Today we are completely externalized into a »pure surface of absorbing and reabsorbing networks of influence«" (2016, p. 50). It becomes more difficult to imagine pathways that lead to the realization of that participatory culture, theorized Jenkins (2006), who took inspiration from the utopia of the principle of collective intelligence drawn by Levy (1994).

As we mentioned above, it is the era of flatness and the filter bubble (Pariser, 2011), the one in which platforms exploit that cancellation of boundaries that profoundly alters the ability of individuals to understand context. The platform society, as defined by van Dijck et al. (2018), is characterized by generating conflict between different value systems and moving based on opaque dynamics. So, technologies play an important role in social evolution, but we also know that the process of social construction occurs through the way in which individuals relate, communicate, and therefore also use technological tools (Pira, 2012). Castells states that relational dynamics and environments are based on the transformation that has taken place giving life to the networked society which has generated a global structure that is confronted with the human experience that still has a local character both in territorial and cultural terms (2001).

### **The role of technology**

This introduction brings us to a central question: What is the role of technology?. I propose two definitions to frame the context in which we are moving to highlight the most critical aspects.

The first definition: Technology becomes "nurturing", as Turkle (2017) explains, because it transforms over time. In this sense, individuals believe that there can be a fair exchange between what technology acquires, and what we get in return. Following Turkle's thesis, we can make some further considerations.

How willing are we to give up our identity, to be transformed into bits and data? Each time we use an app, we digit on a keyboard firstly we share significant parts of our lives and personalities. We are destined to drive the process but all too often the

reality is that we gently succumb to the sweet power of the algorithm. In this sense, Morozov (2020) proposes a severe and critical analysis of the impact of technology on society, introducing the concept of technology of survival. And it is quite clear that the pandemic has upset our lives and the balance that we thought were stable. The globalized world, so far overwhelmed by technology, has not been able to find any other solution than to resort to solutionism, as defined by Morozov.

### **Vetrinization, hyper-connection, polarization**

There are some keywords that better than others make us understand what direction we have taken. These three concepts are based on what we are defining as “digital society”:

**Vetrinization.** The image of oneself becomes an object – other than oneself. Exhibiting oneself online means directing one’s existence to the construction of a hyper-fluid self. We are witnessing the taking root of models of social networks based on a system of anxious relationships that are no longer relationships between individuals, but the relationships between individuals and their public.

**Hyper-connection.** Our days move in a 24-hour flow of interactions through our technological tools. However, we are building relationships less and less.

**Polarization.** Crossed by fears, driven to consumerism, we move almost exclusively according to confirmation-bias, we choose those who think like us, we only trust those who confirm our previous beliefs.

In this climate of cultural disorientation, the impact of the digital society seems to be a fertile ground for the proliferation of increasingly extreme behaviours. The COVID-19 pandemic, the quarantine, and the sudden need to use technology to ensure the continuity of work, educational and cultural activities, have sparked a reflection that involved researchers from numerous fields (Pira, 2020).

It is evident that in the liquid-modern era, deception has become central in the processes of understanding reality and the distinction between true and false is no longer perceived. The significant number of young people with a false profile has confirmed one of the growing issues that is going across the society, namely the proliferation of disinformation. These increasing flows have allowed the emergence of deviated forms of individual freedom that move in the opaque anonymity. The proliferation of disinformation processes opens the issue of violence and the proliferation of phenomena such as cyberbullying. Inherent in the DNA of a false profile is the internalization of a distorted view of the principle of protecting one’s privacy. It is a cultural issue, as Castells called it, purely cultural. In the evolutionary phase of humanity, the fundamental ingredient is information because “the flows of messages and images between the networks constitute the plot and the leitmotif of our social structure” (1996, p. 544).

The researcher claimed that we should have to deal with the historical reality. However, the historical reality may not be understood if systematic falsification de-

prives us of the tools to understand and, therefore, to acquire knowledge. If these information flows are “polluted” by disinformation, what kind of social structure are we creating? There is no longer the reality, because it has been defeated by the flows between the networks that speak only to their own audiences.

### **The proliferation of disinformation and its consequences**

Political institutions seem to have lost the ability to answer to citizens’ needs in a strategic perspective in favour of the continuous search for electoral consensus. The border line between the interior dimension of the individual and his social behaviour is thinning. The path of identity construction is now centred on self-representation through a social networking service (SNS) and the resulting consensus. The subject becomes an object in the moment he obtains the likes, this represents a distortion of the principle of mass auto-communication introduced by Castells. Individual seems not to be able to produce social changes to give life to new community contexts. Nevertheless, we help to create groups characterised by weak links, centred on the obsessive search for a consensus even with the help of instrumental use of false or mystifying contents. The above concepts are useful to define the critic frame in which we are immersed. Castells states that reality for us is neither objective nor subjective, but a material construction of images that mix what happens in the physical world (inside and outside us) with the material inscription of experience in our brain circuits. We build the reality in reaction to real events, internal or external, but our brains do not just reflect these events. Rather, it processes them based on brain circuits own models. Much of the processing activity is unconscious (2009).

It is clear how profound the consequences can be for the spread of disinformation which undermines the consciousness and knowledge underlying the process of interpreting reality. Suffice it to say that fake news basically attack three areas of society: 1) politics, 2) science, and 3) economics.

During the two years of the pandemic emergency, something very serious happened, i.e. the systematic and strategic use of disinformation. This is a huge, critical element in the context of a society that feels increasingly permeated by a feeling of insecurity generated largely by the flow of information in social media. It is therefore evident that the crisis of the traditional media system on the one hand, and the disintermediation processes on the other, cause a real information short-circuit, in which it is difficult to distinguish true from false, which contributes to the spread of fake news. So, we generate a constant stream of information that is used by the owners of the platform to increase their power. In this sense, individuals are led to make some specific choices following the sweet power of algorithm. The dissemination of misinformation, fake news, or alternative truths is increasingly widespread in social networks, while individual groups and communities appear and strengthen with a polarized vision of the world.

Fake news has an enormous power. The inability to recognize the fake shows us how the system recognizes a lack of defense against the influence of disinformation, that is the tendency to unwittingly spread fake news. In this sense, what is perceived as an exercise of freedom by individual users, is a business generator for the few economic actors who control this vast amount of circulating data, which continues to grow exponentially (Pira and Altinier, 2018). This represents one of the consequences of the process of vetrinization of our lives through platforms. To this we can add the emotional response that is increasingly guiding people's actions, particularly on social networks, fueling the phenomena of polarization and hate speech.

Morozov defines the power of the algorithm that modifies the perception of reality, alters the cognitive bias on the basis of which an individual defines the framework and attributes veracity to the content to which he is exposed. A manipulation is, thus, achieved that has profound effects on the cultural and cognitive models of individuals, distorting the mechanisms of building trust and credibility. Thus, we risk

succumbing to technological determinism that hinders our awareness of the social and political situation, invariably presenting it as technological. Technology as a Kantian category of the worldview absorbs all that has not yet been adequately understood and categorized, regardless of whether its roots and its nature are technological or not. [...] The spread of the belief that technology is the main force that shapes the postmodern world is a measure of our [...] neglect of political and moral standards in making decisive choices about the direction of society. (2011, p. 277)

### **The pandemic of disinformation**

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the war in Ukraine show the extent to which a real disinformation strategy is fueled by social media. During the first phase of the pandemic, experts and institutions explained to societies that there were no reasons to worry, that nothing would happen, that everything was under control, because basically we were dealing with an ordinary flu. This was the moment when the change was noted. It became clear that the world was experiencing something much more serious and that scientists did not know how to deal with a completely new situation. In that period, there were as many opinions as people. These opinions seemed to reflect not a different assessment of the pandemic, but real clashes in the world of science, generating a dangerous situation of infodemic, i.e. the ease of believing in anything. Such a situation arouses panic and fear, and if doctors/scientists oppose their scientific theses in the media arena, they risk aggravating their relationship with the patient/citizen and fuel the outbreak of fake news – a phenomenon that takes on a global dimension.

An example of fake news dissemination was QAnon – a conspiracy theory which started in the US in October 2017 with posts by an anonymous 4Chan user

known as “Q”. QAnon received attention, inter alia, from NewsGuard. In late 2019 and early 2020, many new QAnon websites, pages, groups, and accounts appeared in Italy, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, *and quickly amassed large numbers of supporters*. The accounts mentioned in the report are followed by nearly 450,000 followers (Labbe et al., n.d.). NewsGuard reported that it had identified 5 Italian Twitter profiles among the spreaders of fake on coronavirus (D’Alessandro, n.d.). In the era of social media, politics uses viral marketing techniques in which the sole purpose is to elicit emotional reactions that fuel fears and needs already rooted in individuals.

The phenomenon of spreading fake news is also observed in the context of the war in Ukraine. This applies above all to politicians who, participating in propaganda, create an aura of authenticity and directness towards the audience; within a discourse they use disintermediation to create a “pseudo” direct line with the user, in fact, they choose transversality, cross-media. The conflict in Ukraine is also a space for citizen journalism, i.e. the dissemination of information and stories live on the Internet by ordinary people located in conflict zones. This is a more direct way of telling the story of the war but, if not correctly contextualized, it risks distorting reality. In the last few years, not only military technologies have evolved, but above all digital media, which in a short time have become a real “weapon”. For the first time in history, fake news became an integral tool of strategy, like weapons, as if two parallel battles were being fought. During wartime, fake news can hurt like bombs. In addition to the war in Ukraine, there is another battlefield where a less visible, but no less decisive clash is taking place, namely the online one. New technologies undoubtedly facilitate the work of reporters present in war zones. They admit that every day they have to face dozens of fake news spread in order to misinform the public. Opinions that are actually just credible pseudo-news because they are supposed to deceive the inhabitants of the invaded cities. We are witnessing the spread of systematic disinformation that is also becoming an offensive strategy, where hackers become killers of computer systems.

The birth of digital society shows us how the interconnections between content and social relationships have changed. Effective networks need to be created through collaboration between professionals and non-professionals, generating informal credibility to revive a participatory culture.

## SUMMARY

To sum up, individuals shape their social activities based on the processing of received information, and the media play a central role here. The increasing complexity of the ecosystem, data-driven platformization, and the new frontier of artificial intelligence, open up new questions and show the emergence of new critical issues



where the ability to implement strategies for using technologies does not coincide with having the knowledge tools necessary to manage such complex processes. A positivist view of the impact of technology on our lives must take into account the evolution that is taking place in the ecosystem created by technologies, with particular emphasis on the disinformation industry (Pira, 2022, pp. 171–172).

Images propagate exponentially. The fact does not turn into news, it immediately becomes a “media event”. In fact, the narrative of the incident is replaced by an opinion about something that turns into mere spectacle. In the time of disinformation, the contours of what is real are not clear, the indefiniteness grows, giving rise to uncertainty and fear. The contours become blurred, indeterminacy grows, generating insecurity and fear. That is why the role of journalism becomes crucial. The way journalism is practiced has undergone many stages: on the one hand, the tools through which information is conveyed have changed; on the other hand, the transformation of society and the formation of public opinion has had an influence. One of the focal points of these new information models stems precisely from the relationship-interaction that each of us experiences when reading a piece of news and making it the subject of discussion and sharing with others.

Current trends show us that our relational universe has simultaneously become a space for creating and sharing information. This also shows us how the Web itself is evolving. Each of us becomes a node in the Web, creating a profile or searching for information, leaving a trace that causes us to be followed by people with similar tastes or tendencies and we are offered content that companies operating on the Web believe will be of interest to us. Images, photos, videos, replace speech and capture the user’s attention. Sharing, manipulating re-editing, adding images is at the heart of our social life.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the current phenomena show us how marketing strategists have embraced the concept of crowdsourcing, turning it into the strategy of influence, using group dynamics and the ability to influence to guide consumption and opinions. There are no phenomena that develop within territories, places, which strongly characterize the identity of groups. We have gone beyond “the development of media that brings with it homogenization in consumption and speed of reproduction of attitudes” (Cristante et al., 2021, p. 61).

Cross-media becomes an element that promotes the rooting of polarized opinions that are consolidated thanks to a communicative construction focused on the feeling of fear. Politics has not recovered its ethical dimension, the populist language has become deeply rooted in bringing out a public ignorance (Morcellini, 2020). Thus, the process of building public opinion focuses on the concept of silent

citizenship (Pira, 2012) which has evolved into non-participation or episodic participation. Thanks to the power exercised over communication flows, the digital society and the globalized economy have profoundly modified the system of social rules. The progressive weakening of the institutions and the lack of political and social representation has deeply destabilized the individuals who, in an attempt to rebuild an apparent safe framework, join forces in closed communities in which they recognize each other based on primary needs or common enemies.

We had two very difficult years because of the pandemic, and the war in Ukraine made us even more depressed. We cannot sit back and wait for something to change. There is a need to build models within a dynamic, rather than fluid, view of identity, which support a gradual construction in which slowness prevails over immediacy of action, so that the sphere of internalization finds its own space, using technology to enhance this process as much as the actions that result from it. This means abandoning the logic of private-public juxtaposition which until now led not only to the disappearance of the boundaries between the two spheres, but even reversed their perception by individuals, to the extent that they act in a manner increasingly oriented towards making public every aspect of one's private life, through a process that is no longer a process of self-representation but rather of self-exhibition.

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## PANDEMIA DEZINFORMACJI

**Wprowadzenie:** Trwający kryzys pandemiczny nasilił istniejące już zjawiska, w związku z czym stanowi czynnik głębokiej destabilizacji. W szczególności dystans społeczny i brak aktywności fizycznej zmieniły konstrukcję dyskursu publicznego w sieci, dając tym samym początek temu, co nazywa się społeczeństwem platformowym, w którym platformy wytwarzają struktury społeczne, w których żyjemy.

**Cel badań:** Celem artykułu jest wywołanie refleksji nad tym, w jaki sposób dezinformacja, której towarzyszył propagowany przez media kryzys autorytetu ekspertów, w coraz większym

stopniu budowany na kaskadzie informacyjnej i propagacji społecznej, charakteryzowała komunikację instytucjonalną w czasie pandemii. W tym utratę przez nią autorytetu wywołaną subpolityką i dynamiką społeczną. Niniejszy przegląd narracyjny jest oparty na analizie zebranych danych empirycznych.

**Stan wiedzy:** Ograniczenie przestrzeni i wolności osobistej oraz zawieszenie praw zmieniły relacje między obywatelami i instytucjami, dodatkowo modyfikując i osłabiając wymiar sfery publicznej. Dynamika ta głęboko zmieniła schematy obiegu informacji w sieci, które wpłynęły na dokonywane przez użytkowników wybory.

**Podsumowanie:** Dynamika rozprzestrzeniania się fake newsów dzięki sile ich crossmedialności sprzyja utrwalaniu spolaryzowanych opinii, które są połączone z komunikacyjną konstrukcją skupioną na poczuciu strachu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dezinformacja, lustracja, hiperłącza, polaryzacja, infodemia, manipulacja, *fake news*.