Fake News and Populism: New Threats to Public Trust

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Abstract. The article analyses the growing distrust of cultural intermediaries and social and political actors, fuelled by phenomena such as fake news, disinformation and denialism. Indeed, post-modernity has eroded trust in traditional media, facilitating the dissemination of unverified information and making it difficult to discern between reliable and unreliable sources. Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict highlight how communication strategies can profoundly influence public perception. In this context, populism exploits simplifications and emotionally charged narratives, promoting alternative versions of truth that challenge official narratives and contribute to a further polarization of society.

Keywords: democracy, disinformation, fake news, populism, trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

The weakening of individuals' ability to recognise between reliable and unreliable information has led to a development of the phenomenon of post-truth in public discourse. McNair (2017) observes that disinformation is a direct result of the age of post-modernity, the symbol of a manipulative use of data to construct specific narratives.

The advent of post-modernity has contributed to the decline of trust in traditional cultural intermediaries, such as the media, which used to play the primary role of guardians of information (Freedman 2014). The current media environment is fragmented and dominated by multiple unverified sources, thus disinformation has found fertile ground to flourish. Sunstein (2014) points out that the spread of false information is facilitated by this fragmentation, which makes it even more difficult for individuals to recognise and trust.

Disinformation, therefore, arises as an inevitable consequence of the mediatised society of post-modernity, where the distinction between true and false becomes increasingly blurred. Baudrillard (1981: 1-7), in his study of the relationship between reality, representations and the total indistinction between the two, describes this phenomenon as simulacra, stating that our era is one in which simulacra, or copies, have supplanted and preceded reality itself.

The essence of Baudrillard's thought revolves around the notion that representations, or simulacra, are no longer merely copies of a pre-existing reality, but create an entirely new one.

The pandemic emergence from Covid-19 accentuated this substitution and showed us how the proliferation of disinformation at a time of great disorientation contributed to fuelling communication flows that in their alternative or altered representation of reality attempted to replace it. A process that was able to exploit those elements that specifically characterise the way in which fake news and disinformation propagate: appeal, strength, virality, speed, fluidity and cross-media.

- Appeal: it is news that intrigues most people and has an attractive capacity, because it manages to ride the wave of topical issues and penetrate the agenda setting;
- virality: they manage to spread very effectively and reach a large number of people. Fake news has a very high redemption;
- speed: the spread of fake news is rapid and uncontrolled;
- cross-media: this type of news is able to be transversal, i.e. to pass from one media to another, so much so that, in many cases, the news appears on Facebook and is subsequently picked up by the media;
- flow: fake news represents a flow, i.e. it is a series of information aimed at proving a thesis or conveying public opinion towards a clear position that does not always reflect reality;

- strength: fake news, even if unmasked, manages to leave a deep trace in the memory of readers and public opinion (Pira and Altinier 2018: 60).

The Covid-19 pandemic represented a global emergency that had a profound impact on citizens' lives and represented – as Bordigon, Diamanti and Turato (2020) have pointed out – a challenge to the values on which liberal-democratic regimes are founded.

It is precisely the reduction of the spaces of personal freedom, the suspension of rights, that have altered the relationship between citizens and institutions, further modifying and weakening the dimension of the public sphere, which, as Sorice (2020: 372) defines it, represents a spatial metaphor «the result of a collective narrative that takes on meaning in the relations between citizens, political actors and institutional life. It constitutes, in a way, a sort of protected area, a normative space however unstable and transactional».

Therefore, if that normative space is lost, space is left for drifts that alter the dimension of the public sphere. By feeding on extreme simplifications of reality and promoting narratives that emotionally shake the public and distort facts, populism has a direct impact on the perception of truth. The frequent use of polarising statements and the creation of a common enemy further fuels a climate of distrust in institutions, thus challenging the very foundations of democracy and public debate.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an example of how disinformation is now a structured phenomenon. After all, Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018) had already analysed the use of information manipulation as a tool of war, with the aim of influencing public perception through this type of communication. As did Bradshaw and Howard (2018: 12) who stated the strategic use of manipulation as a consequence of the actions deployed by what they define as «cyber troops» to spread junk news and conspiratorial or polarising information that can be used to support a broader campaign of manipulation.

2. FROM PANDEMIC TO WAR IN UKRAINE. EXPLOSION OF DISINFORMATION AND LOSS OF CONFIDENCE

Hyper-mediatisation is certainly one of the main factors in the crisis that has radically transformed the information landscape: the democratisation of content production and distribution has allowed anyone to publish anything, often without any control over quality or veracity, creating a real fragmentation of the information landscape that has made it increasingly difficult for the
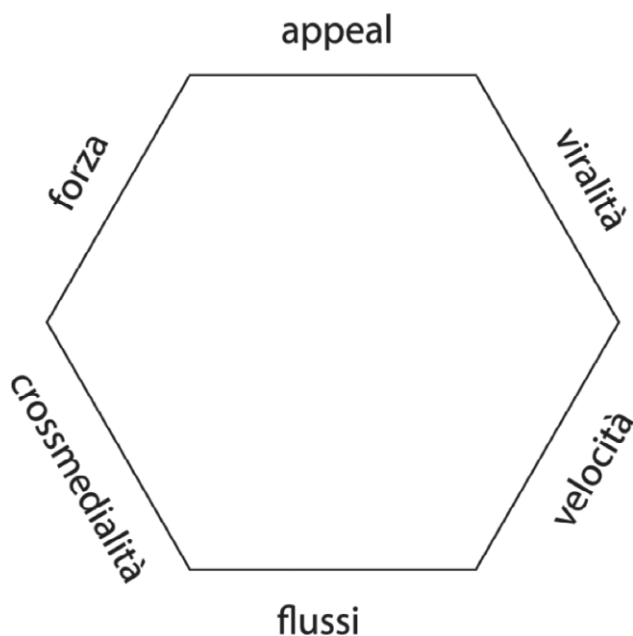

Figure 1. The Exagon of Fake News. (*Ibidem*).

public to discern between reliable and unreliable sources, contributing to the spread of misinformation and fake news (Sunstein 2014), all of which is amplified by the tendency of social media platforms to privilege sensationalist and polarising content, through engagement-oriented algorithmic mechanisms, further amplifying the problem (Pariser 2011) and fostering the formation of «echo chambers» (Sunstein 2017).

Thus, the filter bubble relegates us to our information ghetto, not allowing us to see or explore the huge world of possibilities that exists online. Network planners must strike a balance between relevance and casual discovery, between the pleasure of seeing friends and the excitement of meeting new people, between comfortable niches and open spaces (Parisier 2011: 179). The continuing crises are a factor of profound destabilisation, which have exacerbated the phenomena already in place. The impact of technologies in all social processes shows us how a rapid transformation of the construction models of our social action is taking place. It is the era in which platforms exploit that cancellation of boundaries that profoundly alters the ability of individuals to understand the context, to generate conflict between different value systems and move on the basis of opaque dynamics (Van Diick, Poell and de Waal 2018).

Zuboff's (2019) reflections on the formation of new powers at the emergence of what she calls «surveillance capitalism», which generates a veritable act of digital dispossession, is also along the same lines.

In this context of fragilisation, we are witnessing a construction of public discourse increasingly focused on platform-induced dynamics.

Thus the disinformation industry and the fake news factory fuel fear, mistrust, and fan the flames of social anger that is growing everywhere in a situation of economic crisis, which the pandemic has greatly exacerbated by making social imbalances even more evident. In such a framework, individuals seem less and less capable of coming together for the achievement of common goals, as a consequence of the disruptive drive that surveillance capitalism generates to give impetus to the expropriation of experience. Indeed, there is a key component of the very definition of social capital that is severely fragilised, trust, as investigated by Giddens (1994), Beck (1999), Fukuyama (2018) and Luhman (1989) who attribute to it a key function for the development and survival of society. Where we witness the proliferation of dynamics of entropisation of the experience of the social world resulting precisely from the increasing flows of disinformation (Pira 2021).

This dynamic has been particularly evident in recent political events, such as the Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election, where disinformation has shaped public perceptions and manipulated electoral opinion (Suiter 2016), challenging the very foundations of rational discourse and fostering a culture in which emotional claims and personal narratives prevail over data and empirical evidence. The fragmentation of information sources has eroded trust in traditional institutions such as the media, universities and government authorities. Freedman (2014) emphasises how this decline in trust has paved the way for alternative figures, often with little or no credibility, who nevertheless manage to gain a wide audience through their ability to manipulate emotions and perceptions.

The Covid-19 emergency and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine represent two global events that have further shaken the disinformation problem. This strategy exploited fears, uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, demonstrating how crises can be fertile ground for the proliferation of false and manipulative news. During the Covid-19 pandemic, disinformation reached unprecedented levels, with direct consequences on public health. The «infodemic» (Rothkopf 2003) of fake news made it difficult for people to find reliable sources of information and made informed decisions about their health. The physical distancing and global lockdown of millions of people acted as a magnifying glass on the dynamics and structures of online sociality (Colombo and Rebughini 2021), highlighting moments of solidarity but also an exacerbation of the phenomenon of misinformation. This period exposed our vulnerability regarding the beliefs and value systems we adopt. The pandemic has manifested itself as a profound bio-social crisis, affecting both our physical health and the foundations of our civilised coexistence. Not only did it highlight epidemiological issues, but it also forced a reorganisation of our social life (Belardinelli 2022) and the way we interact with information (Hassan and Pinelli 2022).

Both institutions and the world of politics have contributed to this climate of uncertainty, with often contradictory statements. A climate that persists and has led to a crisis of authority among experts and a climate of distrust towards politics in particular. We have witnessed the collapse of the «expert system» (Giddens 1990), of their ability to influence our actions, of trust. This leads us to introduce reflection on the very notion of trust and its dimension, where according to the vision proposed by Luhman (1989), it presupposes a situation of risk. Indeed, we have crossed the dimension of risk and danger. Just as the danger was looming, the system of experts gave way, so our willingness to trust broke down, because we felt the guarantees of the system of rules to which we were accustomed breaking down and

uncertainty prevailed (Pira 2021). A CENSIS survey in 2020 showed that 29 million Italians (57.0% of the total) found news on the web and social media during the health emergency that later turned out to be false or wrong about the origin, mode of contagion, symptoms, distancing measures or treatment related to Covid-19.

Fake news about Covid-19 covered a wide range of topics, from false remedies and cures to conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus. An emblematic example is the theory that the virus had been created in a laboratory, which found wide space on social media despite the lack of scientific evidence, in fact in that case, the survey (Censis 2020) found that there was a good 38.6% who believed it to be real. These numbers confirm what has been said so far and are useful in understanding the thread that links this health crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to the explicit manifestation of the phenomenon in question, rather than the fact that populisms have in fact exploited disinformation as a strategy and thus as a weapon.

At the same time, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been an example of disinformation, a veritable war on information that has seen both sides involved use manipulative narratives in order to influence domestic and international public opinion: Russia, in particular, has used disinformation as part of its hybrid warfare strategy, seeking to destabilise Ukraine and divide its Western allies, a hypothesis previously developed by Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018). Not only re-shared news, but the widespread dissemination of manipulated videos showing fake or out-of-context military attacks were intended to manipulate public perceptions and foment hatred and fear among the affected populations.

Misinformation related to the conflict also aimed to influence the policies of Western countries: for example, narratives portraying NATO as the aggressor sought to undermine support for the alliance's defensive actions. This type of disinformation was particularly effective in creating political and social divisions in NATO member states, hindering a unified response to the crisis. The manipulation of information has also had an impetuous impact on the Ukrainian population, aiming to demoralise citizens and create confusion about the real intentions of the armed forces, favouring cyber attacks targeting critical infrastructure, highlighting how disinformation and cyber operations are closely intertwined in modern warfare strategies (Rid 2020). Kapferer (1987) pointed out how the introduction of concepts of truth and falsehood in the scientific definition of rumour can sometimes be misleading for the study of counter-narratives as tools for altering dominant narratives and

social change: it is a true narrative warfare, as described by Jedlowski (2022) that shapes the perception of the present through a combination of testimonies and inventions. In this dynamic, the success or failure of a narrative lies not so much in its ability to attest to the truth, but in its ability to imitate reality.

In this context, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is emblematic insofar as communication focuses on mutual accusations of distorting reality, often accompanied by the use of narrative elements that manipulate or attack symbols and collective identities, concerning the historical memory or mythologies of the peoples involved. These narrative elements become powerfully transmissible tools in their continuous public use. Memory thus becomes a crucial reservoir for a universe of representations and images that allow the narrative to bind with group identities, pre-existing and newly acquired ideas, worthy of being preserved and passed on (Affuso and Giungato 2022).

Populism in the post-modern era not only exploits misinformation, but actively fuels a culture in which multiple and conflicting narratives become instruments of power. This, characterised by the ability to use the public's emotions to construct a narrative that pits the «pure people» against a «corrupt elite» (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 6), uses disinformation to delegitimise traditional sources of information, creating an environment in which people are inclined to believe information that confirms their pre-existing prejudices, regardless of its veracity (Waisbord 2018: 7). As highlighted by Raffini (2022), it feeds on the distrust of traditional institutions and proposes a worldview in which alternative truths proliferate, sustained by the fragmentation of the information landscape. The phenomenon is further amplified by transmediality, which allows content to cross different media platforms, creating a multiplicity of narratives that are often beyond the control of traditional information sources.

Transmediality also implies that content is no longer confined to single media, but can range from one platform to another, facilitating the dissemination of coherent and engaging narratives that can be exploited for disinformation purposes (Jenkins 2006: 96). This creates an environment in which truth becomes subjective, with narratives competing for the audience's attention. The strategic use of transmediality by populist movements makes it even more difficult for individuals to discern between reliable and unreliable information. Raffini (2022) points out how populism exploits the fragmentation of the information landscape to promote a political discourse based on delegitimising opponents and creating a simple, polarising narrative. This approach not only

undermines trust in traditional institutions, but also contributes to the spread of a culture of post-truth, in which alternative narratives become instruments of power, also creating a continuous flow of information that is often beyond the control of traditional information sources.

The cases analysed so far are emblematic examples of how disinformation can be used to manipulate public opinion in different contexts. During the pandemic, disinformation exploited fear and uncertainty to spread conspiracy theories and undermine trust in health institutions (Cinelli *et al.* 2020: 4). In parallel, misinformation during the war in Ukraine used polarising narratives to influence public opinion and justify political actions (Starbird *et al.* 2020: 10), which highlight how misinformation can adapt to different contexts, exploiting the peculiarities of each crisis to achieve its goals.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The digital era has profoundly changed the structure of society, influencing not only how we receive and disseminate information, but also how we perceive and construct reality. The predominant role of digital technologies in these processes has raised discussions and concerns about their ability to influence the public and private spheres, prompting some to consider these technologies as a potential threat to democracy and individual and collective identity formation.

The distinction between public and private spaces becomes increasingly invisible in the digital sphere, and individuals often share details of their personal lives in spaces that, while seemingly private, are in fact global stages, changing even the very concept of privacy and exposing users to new levels of public scrutiny and manipulation, both commercial and political. The ability of platforms to influence commercial preferences and political opinions poses yet another obstacle to democratic institutions, which have to balance freedom of expression with the need to protect the democratic process from manipulation and disinformation.

In this context, strategies to combat disinformation have become an essential component of the defence of democratic societies, although the effectiveness of these tools is always difficult to assess, especially since disinformation constantly evolves in response to the measures taken to counter it. The greatest danger is that disinformation is not only a technological or informational problem, but also a cognitive one, as human nature, already vulnerable to confirmation bias and emotional influence, is exploited by disinformation. Therefore, in addition to purely technical solutions, a cultural change is needed to promote critical thinking and public deliberation as core values in the digital society.

Curbing this obstacle is only possible through the cooperation of all social actors: governments, businesses, educational institutions and citizens themselves, in order to create an information environment that is more transparent and less susceptible to manipulation, should take into account the regulation of digital platforms.

The challenge posed by disinformation and digitisation is complex and multifaceted, but it is at the same time a great opportunity to renew the commitment to a more informed, fairer and freer society, and the ability to navigate this new landscape will be a decisive step not only for the resilience of democracies, but also for the quality of civil coexistence in the digital future.

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