

To beat Fake news with a responsible journalism

Francesco Pira*

Abstract:

The daily life has turned into an infosphere from the objectification of reality we have passed to subjectivization, the extremization of the process of mediation has cancelled in the perception of individuals the category of the real. We are immersed in this universe where the flow of words, images overwhelms us even when we believe to be protagonists. One of the most obvious paradoxes of the digital society to be built on the I-user, is that of the false perspective of the individual at the center. An aspect of great importance regards the role that the social platforms themselves are taking on. The proliferation and dissemination of fake news is no longer an episodic phenomenon but is an integral part of a well-defined strategy that also involves politics and that exploits social dynamics to build consensus and manipulate public opinion. It is a fact of an industry of global influence and that crosses all sectors of society.

Keywords: Fake News, Manipulation, Misinformation, Journalism, Disinformation

*Francesco Pira is professor in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the University of Messina, and Coordinator and teacher of the Master: Social Media Manager - Department of Ancient and Modern Civilization. He is journalist and author of various publications in the field of communication, especially digital communication and social networks.

1. Introduction

This contribution aims to highlight the central role of journalism in the interpretation of reality and development of a participatory culture. We live in a social environment where the flow of messages is continuous and incessant and consists at the same time of those we receive and those that we produce by ourselves, the power of click. We are immersed in this universe where the flow of words, images overwhelms us even when we believe to be protagonists. Individuals have lost the ability to deepen, the time of rationalization, of intellectualization. As Jenkins states: "The social production of meaning is something more than the multiplication of individual interpretations; it involves a qualitative difference in the ways in which we give meaning to cultural experiences, and in this sense implies a profound change in the ways in which we understand the theme of competences. [...] there is a need for skills to work within social networks, to share knowledge within a collective intelligence, to negotiate through the cultural differences that characterize the assumptions that conduct the different communities to reconcile the fragments of conflicting information in order to form a coherent picture of the world around them." (Jenkins, 2009: 95). The proliferation of fake news and misinformation underline the state of crisis of journalism that is part of the deeper fracture in the relationship between citizens and Institutions. In the collective imagination social media are more reliable than journals as a consequence of the deep mistrust of institutions and an unjustified faith in the disintermediation process that would produce the emancipation of the communities. In this scenario the fake news proliferate like those unveiled by the debunker David Puente who unmasked the Facebook account of a self-styled Laura Pedroni who in Italy created viral fakes on public figures such as: Roberto Saviano, Matteo Renzi, Laura Boldrini and others. And fake news can heavily influence not only politics but also consumptions. For this reason it is essential that the newspapers regain their role as "watchdogs of democracy" with a constant work of denial of the fake news. The role of fact checking is fundamental, the control of sources as a strict rule of traditional media.

The data that emerges from the most recent surveys conducted in Italy and abroad demonstrate how large is the phenomenon of fake news proliferation and the increasing difficulties to face it. Starting from these elements and we consider that for digital journalism the quality of the format and the news makes the difference. The media must know how to offer different formats and depths of contents than those that circulate online. Only in this way we can contribute to the concretization of the notion of participatory culture introduced by Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006), in the society.

2. The challenge for a new culture in the era of disinformation

The daily life has turned into an infosphere², from the objectification³ of reality we have passed to subjectivization, the extremization of the process of mediation has cancelled in the perception of individuals the category of the real as defined by Berger (Berger, 1966). The process of objectification is not achieved here, with the consequent personal detachment from reality that should favor the initiation of processes of internalization and construction of individual thought⁴. The dynamics of the face to face no longer exist, in the function of language its primary quality, objectivity is lost.

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

Thus interconnection does not support the process by which experiences and meanings become objective, submerged by information flows, individuals undergo an acceleration in the attempt not to lose the connection rather than to seek the relationship.

This strongly emerges from recent surveys conducted in several countries. In this sense the data collected in Italy show a critic situation:

- 65.46% of Italians do not recognize a fake news
- 78.75% is not able to identify a fake news website
- 82.83% is not able to identify the official page of a fake news website

(Source: Infosfera Report 2018- Univ. Suor Orsola Benincasa)

²The term *infosphere* designates the set of information and communication media, as well as the set of information circulating through these means, equally *infos* designate interconnected informational bodies, in which information and emotions are polarized, subjective, individual and collective to the same time. (Report Infosfera, 2018, pp 12-13)

³Reference is made to the definition of an Ong which identifies three main directions in which writing, the phonetic alphabet and the press develop and empower the human word as a means of social relation. Agreements such as the possibility of storing information in the form of documents. The ability to transmit messages at a distance and the ability to reproduce and disseminate messages to a larger number of recipients. In order for this to happen, however, it is necessary that the word is fixed, crystallized, separated from its natural context, and depersonalized separated from its author. (Ong W.J., 1982, p.75)

⁴As McLuhan argues, the media influence the character of society and precisely the alphabet represents an aggressive and active element that absorbs and transforms cultures (McLuhan, 1962: 102). And yet language itself has changed, the word, the writing, the act of objectification that derives from it no longer exists.

Disintermediation without tools and skills of interpretation makes us to believe that simplicity and freedom of use are transformed into axioms of truth, where the whole process of identity building and knowledge formation is centered on the I-user. We are witnessing an exponential consumerism of information that generates a bit-based economy. The data, the information is the economic good par excellence, proof of that are the financial numbers generated by the big players of the media industry. To share contents and part of its own life on social networks is perceived by individuals – users as an exercise of freedom, but this is above all a business generator for the few economic actors who control this immense amount of circulating data, which continues to grow exponentially.

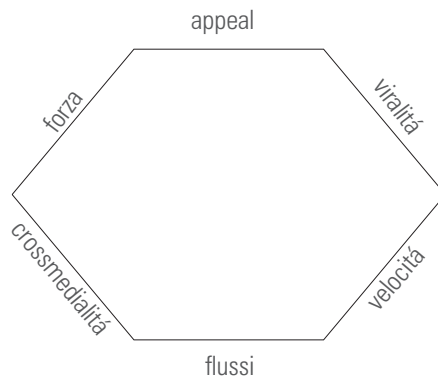
Moreover even the relationship between the publishing system and journalism and social platforms appears to be full of contradictions and opacity. A multi-year research work conducted by the Tow Center of the Columbia School of Journalism shows evidence that deserve a deep reflection:

- 1,100 interviewed journalists said they had a conflictual relationship with social media.
- Half of the respondents affirmed that social media platforms (like Facebook) strengthened their relationship with the public, while 22% said they had weakened due to social media platforms;
- Platforms continue to shape both the style and substance of the publisher's content, either directly with financial incentives (Facebook has offered publishers substantial advertising credits on its platform to participate in product launches), and indirectly (Apple accepts the pitches from publishers who try to be present in their news app). The platforms look to offers in a "Netflix-style" and treat publishers like production companies.

The reality shows that large publishing groups take full advantage of the constantly evolving applications developed by the owners of the platforms to convey the news, building an agenda setting increasingly in line with the tastes of users.

This generates an important first consequence: that journalism is partly a victim of itself and that has contributed at least in part to the massive proliferation of fake news and misinformation.

By consequence we are all, large public, exposed to this type of communication, insiders and public opinion because fake news displays, as we have exposed in previous works, some features that make them a very powerful tool. In particular, they show some characteristics:



(Source: Pira e Altinier, 2018: 95)

Appeal: Mechanism of attraction and distortion of the agenda setting. An apparent contrast between journalism and SNS companies. Big news broadcasts take advantage of app and algorithm developing an agenda setting in line with people 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 is the demonstration of how difficult it can be to identify them and how difficult it is to unmask the misinformation because it confuses 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 the digitalized society. The distortionary power of disintermediation.

Flow: fake news represent a flow. A set of information spread to demonstrate a thesis or to direct public opinion towards a position that does not reflect reality.

Crossmediality: This kind of news is able to be transversal. To cross different media platforms. A news posted on Facebook is immediately relaunched by other media.

Strenght: 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 e Howard, 2018)

Fake news have an enormous power. They have conditioned the American elections⁵ and the referendum on the exit of England from the EU, the so-called Brexit. The same happened during the Italian election campaign in 2018, recording several striking cases of fakes, sometimes arriving in the pages of newspapers or in news services⁶. Fake news risks influencing the construction of the collective imagination, because, as Lippman 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 more or less organized images to describe the world that is not seen". It is clear that today 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 opinion is based not on a direct and certain knowledge, but on images that are formed or given to him" (Lippmann, 1922). The fake news, however, before being a hoax represent for those who are a communication professional an 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. (lvi)

And the concentration of the information system, more and more as a prerogative of large groups, is significantly reducing the space for the existence of independent and local publishing. The myth of the free web today is to be definitively classified as an utopia, while the false myth of the I-user which should have created the prospect of true participation from below takes shape.

3. Fake news vs fact checking

One of the most obvious paradoxes of the digital society is that even built on the I-user, on the false perspective of the individual at the center, it makes everyone similar and leads to the homologation through the proliferation of several micro universes, based on the dynamics of the echo chambers, which crystallizes each group within dynamics induced by technology and messages and only by those contents that the administrators convey through it.

An aspect of great importance regards the role that the social platforms themselves are taking on. The fake news and misinformation scandals called the operators to a responsibility assumption, but at the same time paved the way for a prospect in which, thanks to the immense treasure of personal data of the millions of users they own, become creators of contents, through

⁴ Source: *Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*, Oxford Internet Institute, 2018.

⁵ AgCom Report 2018

algorithms that are developed for automatic cancellation/suppression of news. The power of the algorithm that replaces the power of the filter already widely investigated by Parisier. (Parisier, 2011).

The proliferation and dissemination of fake news is no longer an episodic phenomenon but is an integral part of a well-defined strategy that also involves politics and that exploits social dynamics to build consensus and manipulate public opinion. It is a fact of an industry of global influence and that crosses all sectors of society.

There seems to be a path of passive propagation of content, with individuals increasingly victims of the "sweet power" exercised by the algorithms that guide our choices and which lead us to lock ourselves in "safe enclosures" of similar, rather than open ourselves to the construction of a new participatory culture. (Jenkins, 2006)

The most obvious risk is that of succumbing to that technological determinism referred to by Morozov, who points out that the "most dangerous characteristic of succumbing to technological determinism is that it hinders our awareness of the social and political situation, invariably presenting it as technological. Technology as a Kantian category of the world view is probably too expansionist and centralizing, it absorbs everything that has not yet been adequately understood and categorized, regardless of whether its roots and its nature are technological or not." (Morozov, 2011: 281)

These considerations make it clear that fact checking does not represent only an instrument, but rather a fundamental method to build a credible communication based on real facts.

- the control of sources: when a game of rebounds, shares, word of mouth typical of digital environments is triggered, it may be particularly difficult to identify the original source, but it is a necessary step. We need a "networked" approach: in front of the abundance of information we must select, already before and in advance of the moment of emergency, some users who they are more reliable than others;
- cultivate doubt: it is the first rule of those who do not want to give up on understanding. And it is, or should be, also a rule of communication: always seek solid confirmation of what we communicate;
- time: an error in communication risks irreparably compromising the image and reputation of a professional. It is necessary to have time to check sources and contents. A correct and verified communication, in the long run, wins over those who aim only to say something before the others. Credibility is not improvised, but is built and, to do so, it takes time;

- networking: there is no algorithm to verify the veracity of the news. Cross-checking with your sources remains a useful and usable tool. The ability to build a consolidated verification system is a strong point for those who work in the world of communication;
- the reliability of the blue check: the numerous fact - checking tools offered by technology and digital environments can not be ignored: from the blue badges that distinguish the official profiles of journalists, politicians and public figures to social media. Different platforms that allow to get some more information on multimedia contents;
- the counterflow: once the fake news have been identified and the direction in which they want to bring the public opinion beyond the real data, it is fundamental that the media, politics, institutions and companies put in place a counterflow able to disassemble the hoaxes. To fake news, fact checking is not enough, but it is necessary to demonstrate and narrate the truth of the facts and trigger another narrative that declines on different and objective facts. (Pira e Altinier, 2018: 100-101)

4. Conclusions

The online news extends their influence more for the ability to intercept the mechanisms of operation of the networks that for the intrinsic quality of their news-value. It is clear, therefore, that the quality of the format and the news makes the difference. The media must know how to offer different formats and depths of contents than those that circulate online. The difference is quality. And quality is a value. Readers have also changed deeply in the communicative ecosystem. More and more accustomed to frequent social networks and having to manage a continuous bombardment of news. Therefore, today it is essential to bring the media closer to targets that are moving further and further away. To manage and capture the targets on the market, the management of the various platforms available becomes strategic. Content building is a question of flows. A process that takes place especially when we have to fight fake news. It is not enough to refute the false news, but it becomes functional to trigger a series of positive information on the same topic, contributing to the construction of a counter-flow of information to run on all available platforms.

Technology can have a positive role as a facilitator and a tool for the growth of society, but media technology has transformed society into a media society and the production of communication technology is increasingly concentrated in the hands of big players: from Google, to Facebook, Microsoft, Apple. The data presented shows how much social networks are present in our lives. One of the aspects that makes this field of research particularly complex is linked to the economic implications that social relations bring with them. Communicating through the media, disseminating content has turned people into authors but increasingly into media consumers even when they do not want to. The challenge is to turn individuals from passive consumers into critical

consumers and into conscious authors through a path that has just been outlined, where the defining schemes of the twentieth century are now completely outdated and it is therefore necessary to build new ones, starting from the previous ones adapting them where possible and creating new ones where necessary. A shared and open path that can benefit from the contribution from the bottom of all the active components of society but that requires solid cultural foundations and technological skills in order to avoid this development occurring within the pre-established circuits by the creators of technology.

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