

Is faking news a side effect of hyperconnectivity?

This special issue of *Sociologia e Politiche Sociali* is devoted to a topic that has kept public opinion awake in the last few years: fake news. The term “fake news” has become part of everyday language and in principle it does not need much explanation (although, as we shall soon see, this obviousness is not at all obvious). The social issue of fake news, on the other hand, still needs an explanation, at least from a sociological standpoint. The only thing that we know for sure for now is that fake news give rise to much concern: practically all social fields, from politics to medicine, from mass media to education, from economy to religion, feel somehow threatened by the uncontrolled spread of false news. In its 2013 report, the World Economic Forum (2013, 25) stated that one of the global risks of a hyperconnected society is the massive disinformation that is spread through digital media. Unlike traditional mass media, such as the printed press, radio or television, digital media in fact favour “self-amplified information loops” which would have been unthinkable in the pre-Internet age. In its 2018 report, the World Economic Forum (2018, 48ff.) once again reaffirmed this concern, moving from the rather explicit assumption that unexpected political events such as the Brexit referendum and US presidential elections may have been somehow steered by fake news and disinformation. Two years before, the Oxford Dictionary chose “post-truth” as word of the year.

Scholars agree that the issue of fake news needs «to be taken seriously» (Dentith 2017, 77). In the meantime, however, the uncertainty about what is actually fake news and how to deal with the problem of disinformation also increases (cf. Gelfert 2018). Farkas and Schou (2018, 308) show that, in the public opinion arena, the term “fake news” has become a “floating signifier” that means «different things in different contexts». If anything spread by the mass media can be considered fake, the distinction between fake and reliable, false and true is no longer useful. What remains are simply news.

This uncertainty already transpires from the terminological difficulties that experts have to solve when they deal with the topic. The high level group of experts set up by the European Commission in 2018, for example, preferred the term “disinformation” to “fake news”, although both terms are used in the report’s subtitle. This report defines disinformation as «all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit» (European Commission 2018, 10). Unfortunately, this definition adds problems rather than solving them. How is it possible, in fact, to

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establish when information is inaccurate? Is there, in general, such a thing as information that is not inaccurate or somehow misleading? And how can communicators' intentions be detected and verified? In addition, the European Commission expert group focuses on two intentions that could justify the spread of disinformation: public harm and profit. Precisely this justification, however, raises doubts about the actual novelty of the phenomenon of fake news.

It has always been known that journalists conceive of their job in a rather casual manner. At the end of the 19th century, Montgomery-McGovern (1898, 240ff.) deplored the proclivity of gutter journalism for fake news with the sole motivation to earn money, regarding it as something «dirty and disreputable» (242). Almost a century before that, Heinrich von Kleist ([1809]1993, 362ff.) explained how politics might steer the production and dissemination of news to deceive public opinion or to smear and discredit political opponents. If this thus leads us to wonder what is new in fake news, the impression is that the answer should be very little. On the other hand, it is undeniable that digital media make a difference compared to mass media that we should now define as “traditional” – printed media, radio or television. Sociological research should clarify what this difference consists of.

Moving from these assumptions, the papers published in this special issue share the hypothesis that, despite their apparent triviality, fake news are something more than a technologically new reproduction of an old social issue. We therefore ask whether the phenomenon of fake news is an opportunity to investigate not so much news as such, as the structures of new media and their disruptive impact on contemporary society. Here, the delay of sociological research is particularly clear and there are still gaps that need to be filled.

There are two reasons for the weakness of the current debate about fake news. First, an insufficient understanding of what information actually is. The proliferation of terms such as “misinformation”, “disinformation” and “problematic information” (Floridi 2012, 60ff.; Marwick 2018, 478ff.) is consequence of a still ontological idea of reality that allows for only one single correct description of one single existing reality. This idea leads to untenable conclusions. For example, disinformation causes harm (while, on the contrary, information always has positive effects). However, information can be as harmful as disinformation, as legal experts who deal with the right not to know or the right to be forgotten know very well.

The second cause is that scholars usually focus on the effects that news might have on recipients, while neglecting the media side of the phenomenon. In its report on fake news, the European Commission (2018, 10ff., 31f.) points out that problems of disinformation are “deeply intertwined” with the development of digital media. However, the Commission omits to explain such intertwinement.

From a sociological standpoint, precisely this intertwinement constitutes what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of fake news. Only recently have we begun to understand the cognitive structures of the new media, although research about online disinformation «is in its infancy» (Marwick 2018, 487). These structures are

characterised by a number of paradoxes and counter-intuitive consequences, which lead to the assumption that, in the phenomenon of fake news, *spreading* plays a much more central role than *production*. To express it in other terms, the resonance of this kind of news does not primarily depend on their contents (although the subject of these news is intentionally chosen to attract more attention as possible), but how they are put into circulation. To investigate this dissemination, scholars even suggest the use of epidemiological methods which deal with fake news as if they were a virus that spreads in the environment (Kucharski 2016, 525). It seems therefore that circulation is where digital media with their capability of hyperconnectivity make the difference. One research hypothesis which should be further investigated could be that there is no such a thing as disinformation that spreads through digital media, rather it is digital media that produce a massive phenomenon of disinformation.

The contributions collected in this special issue investigate this hypothesis from different standpoints. In their paper, Gérald Bronner and Laurent Cordonier show that Internet facilitates the dissemination and acceptance of spurious beliefs because it amplifies Web users' confirmation bias, which in turn could induce users to endorse pseudoscientific and conspiracy beliefs. Giancarlo Corsi explains how the public sphere of the mass media system produces both transparency (of contents) and "intransparency" (of consequences and intentions). Corsi's hypothesis is that the phenomenon of disinformation is generated in the short-circuit triggered by the public sphere when it swings back and forth between information and insinuation, between knowledge and suspicion about intentions. In their paper, Antonio Peruzzi, Fabiana Zollo, Ana Lucia Schmidt and Walter Quattrociochi present scientific evidence, coming from a data-driven approach, that online users tend to select information confirming their worldview in spite of dissenting information, and that such a trend fosters the emergence of polarized groups around shared narratives. Alberto Cevolini states that the phenomenon of fake news is an old and new phenomenon at the same time, even if to understand this phenomenon we do not need a new concept of fake news but a new media theory. Cevolini's main hypothesis is that fake news exploit the mass media system's need of standing information processing to "stage dissent" rather than "manipulate consent". Finally, on the basis of a culturalist approach, Gianluca Maestri investigates how fake news are narrated and how they deal with alternative narratives, focusing on the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.

Alberto Cevolini and Gérald Bronner

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