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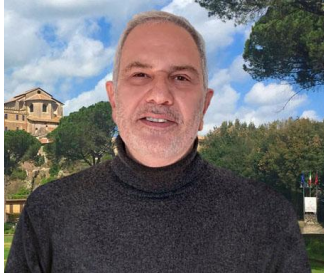
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The Change in Digital Reality: Protecting Consumers from Fake News

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The Change in Digital Reality: Protecting Consumers from Fake News



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It will not be easy to forget 2020 and not just because of the terrible pandemic which ravaged the world for most of the year, killing millions of people and undermining the global economic and social foundations of our society. We will remember it also for the incredible evolution of the “fake news” phenomenon into what can now be described as a tangible terroristic weapon, capable of radicalizing the masses, influencing choices and decisions, and eventually setting aside the value of truth, facts, and reality.

A History:

Let’s be clear: fake news and the production of content aimed at public disinformation, published as articles, images or videos, disguised as real news and aimed at manipulating public opinion, has a long history. Many of us may remember the case of Orson Wells announcing during his radio broadcast a hostile alien invasion of Earth in 1938, causing a large wave of panic in the population (Schwartz, 2015). Another famous piece of fake news was published by the *New York Times* in 1834 with a series of articles describing the moon as rich with vegetation and animals. The stories were signed by an alleged influential scientist, Andrew Grant, who in reality, also did not exist (“History Reference”).

There also exists much more dramatic exploitations of fake news, such the one relating to the Protocol of the Elders of Zion, that deliberately claimed Jews wanted to seize the world through a secret, powerful coalition (“Protocols”). Used by the Nazi and Fascist propaganda, this fake news was used to increase political consensus and power, which ultimately led to the tragedy of the Holocaust.

In the more recent past, we have all witnessed the proliferation of absurd theories and pseudo-news, brought to the public as truthful and able to generate proselytism. Examples include, “COVID-19 does not exist; it is a Big Pharma invention to enslave people,” “there are many examples of fraud during the presidential election in the USA,” and even “Greta Thunberg is connected to the Rockefeller and Rothschild families and to the masonry” without forgetting about Qanon and its claims of a pedophile-ruled society. Here in Italy (as well as in the USA and many other democratic countries), we have also witnessed clamorous fakes, like the photography of a group of people of color, evidently in good health and smiling, published by the neo-fascist movement of Matteo Salvini as proof that the tragic exodus of immigrants from Africa was a hoax, while the photo was just... a selfie made by a famous rapper.

Why is this Happening?

The exponential growth of fake news is driven by the progress of technology that brought a global computerization and the creation of social networks – probably the most significant revolution in the (digital) history of mankind.

Global-social-network users have reached a record number of 3.7 billion people (with Facebook counting over 2.3 billion). The number of users is expected to grow to 4.4 billion by 2025 (Tankovska, 2021). Almost half of the European population are declared as Facebook users (Wired, 2018). Analyzing the data further, 90.4% of the European Facebook users are Millennials, 77.5% are Gen X, and 48.2% of Baby Boomers are active social network users, spending an average of three hours per day involved in social media related activities. We are (not so) slowly becoming dependent on social networks.

Social platforms have also had a notable impact on more “traditional” media, which have been forced to switch from a “broadcast model,” where editors dictated the agenda of discussion, to the “social model” that simply does not include an editor’s role and users are self-establishing the agenda. In the social model, communication happens without filter, and this is certainly a sign of progress and a safeguard for freedom of information – as proven by the failed attempt to embed press and reporters with the army during the war in Iraq, evidently aimed at controlling their flow of information and was overruled by social media content posting. On the other hand, the social model

does not include any pre-emptive screening on what is published by the users; anyone is free to post anything, including dangerous fake news and organized disinformation campaigns.

How Does This Work?

Left alone in front of the changing communication scenario, we are continuously bombarded by information. Consequently, we have the tendency to develop:

- Cognitive Overload: saturation of our individual brain's capability of processing the information we receive. This leads to a decreased level of attention and focus, leaving us vulnerable to be deceived.
- Confirmation Bias: systematic cognitive error that brings us to agree with the information while disregarding the information denying it. This is why we tend to associate with people with similar mindsets.
- Sheep Effect: process when we give more credibility to information deemed true by a larger number of people.
- Emotional Impact: activation of strong emotions facing sensational news reducing the efficiency of cortical centers responsible for rational thinking.
- Filtering Bubble Effect: tendency of restricting our cognitive universe according to the reality the algorithm of the social network builds around us based on our profile preferences and social discussions (Menczer & Hills, 2020).

Let's make a concrete case: Hypothetically, Sam is a young man worried about infection of COVID-19, but he is not accustomed to reading a lot and does not trust mainstream media; he prefers his friends' opinions. When he reads on Facebook that the fear of COVID-19 is exaggerated, he does not trust that, but when his job becomes at risk because of the pandemic, he starts to wonder about the true risk. He does not know anyone who died from the virus, but one of his colleagues writes a post stating that COVID-19 has been created by Big Pharma in collusion with corrupt politicians (which coincides with his lack of trust in the political class). He starts to search the internet on the subject and finds articles claiming that COVID-19 is nothing more than a common flu. He subscribes to a group for people who fear losing their jobs because of the pandemic restrictions. Soon afterward, he gets an invitation to join a manifestation against governmental health measures. When his sister asks him about the manifestation, Sam shares his belief with her: COVID-19 is a hoax.

The motivations to produce fake news include the ability to:

- To make money. Fake news websites benefit from increased traffic to make advertising money.
- To increase sales and visibility, there are many examples of newspapers and websites using click-baiting strategies and fake news to increase sales.

- To influence choices and strategically manipulate public opinion. An example of this are defamation campaign slanders used against public figures.
- To cheat and/or steal personal data. This data can later sell to data management companies (i.e. our email boxes are full of mails – called phishing – sent from dressed-up companies or fake official public entities or officials (“History of Phishing”).

Artificial Intelligence also plays a role, offering sophisticated opportunities to falsify documents and multimedia. At the University of Washington, researchers have selected an audio file mimicking a Barack Obama speech and analyzed millions of images of the former US President to identify the casual movements of his face and mouth during speeches (Vincent, 2017). Artificial Intelligence has synchronized the appropriate face and mouth movements with the selected speech, synthesizing the result in a high-definition, audio-video file in which President Obama is giving a speech, one he actually never delivered.

Reality falsification is a real threat to all of us as technology is providing both the tools for production and global distribution of fake news.

Fake news can promote unliberal and anti-democratic consequences. Experts have collected strong indications that fake news has had a significant impact and influence in crucial world events such as Brexit, when Facebook and Twitter accounts close to Russia published 18.5 million posts against the European Union (“European Data Journalism Network”). In addition to the 2017 German elections, when 2,840 social-network users close to the Kremlin were identified while creating groups supporting the neo-Nazi extreme right party; or the 2018 Italian parliamentary elections when (according to all major news sources) over 90% of the content published on social media in conjunction with Russian channel Russia Today and the news agency Sputnik were supporting the Italian communities opposing immigration to foster racial antagonism.

In Italy:

In 2018, a few months before the Italian elections, 150 social media accounts were activated and distributed in less than one minute, all showcasing the same text which magnified Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing party Lega Nord (“European Data”). Authorities later ascertained they were all sleeping accounts, left dormant since the 2016 Referendum, that were reactivated just before the critical parliamentary elections of 2018. All accounts resulted as a connection to Lega Nord, either directly or through websites in Bulgaria.

According to the European Data Journalism Network, (a network of independent media organizations and data newsrooms producing and promoting data-driven coverage of European topics in several languages), the strategy to condition the political process in democratic countries includes:

1. Disinformation: to produce and distribute fake news or falsify real news.
2. Electoral advertising: using false generalities to buy advertising space for the supported candidates.
3. Emotional influence: to use fake accounts, trolls and bots to unleash emotional impacts on social media.
4. Identity falsification: in order to distribute fake news, phishing, and other online harassment techniques.
5. Hacking and news leaking: to infiltrate regular accounts and publish fake news or falsify existing content.
6. Patrol hacking: to attack computerized systems of institutions or media.
7. Infrastructure attack: penetrate the electronic voting systems, voters' database, and technological infrastructures.
8. Influencing the elite: address decision-makers at all levels through direct email contact, forums, chat, and social media
9. Financing: directing financing usually through third parties.

The combination of the mental traps, originated by our neurocognitive mechanisms, cause us to twist facts. The extraordinary content distribution possibilities offered by social media are creating a post-truth era, a context where ideology wins over reality because an exponentially growing number of people care little or nothing about where the truth is.

“Truth does not exist: it is only an instrument of power,” said the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (“Will to power”). What really matters today is the power to impose a version of the facts, not necessarily true, repeating simple and attractive concepts even if not necessarily based on reality.

“It took us decades to get the scientific data showing the danger of cigarette smoking accepted. To do that we had to fight against corporate slogans telling customers what they wanted to hear...The same consultants suggested oil corporations adopt the same strategy with climate change, creating and financing research institutions to produce data able to instill doubt. To achieve their objective, it was sufficient to claim there were two possible interpretations of the facts, that science was somehow divided, and it was consequently possible to believe that the increase in temperature registered in the last

150 years were normal fluctuations the planet has always had over time and not that we are willingly fast forwarding towards a planetary catastrophe” (McIntyre).

In 2020, the attack brought against science during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a clear example of how mass-conditioning is nowadays a common practice. Science is based on established facts and data; one who denies science can deny any other form of reality. The creation of an alternative fake reality is aimed at conditioning the masses to subordinate truth to politics, creating the ideal environment for stepping into an authoritative regime.

Between January and March 2020, over 1.7 billion fake accounts have been eliminated from social networks (Tankovska, 2021). Twitter removed 32,000 accounts connected to China, Russia, and Turkey. The largest network was operated by China, with a nucleus of 23,750 accounts, spreading content through 150,000 additional social network accounts (Doran, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the main content removed dealt with fake information and conspiracy theories, reported by the international organizations and local authorities as potentially dangerous to health or life for the population.

The most alarming development has undoubtedly been the use of these techniques to create an alternative and totally baseless reality, often using institutional credibility with the explicit support of TV networks, radios, and websites. This multimedia campaign, repeated on a daily basis to the American public, was temporarily challenged by the insurgency of the pandemic. Nonetheless, the multimedia fake news campaign did not stop and eventually accelerated after the results of the presidential election. It did not matter that all legal action brought forward to challenge the results had resulted in a clamorous fiasco. Finally, the fake news campaign resulted in the January 6 insurgency and the siege of Capitol Hill. Similar to the Pizzagate case, conspiracy theory followers believed the lies.

It is time to face the fake news issue as a serious problem and a threat to our democracies.

Fact-checking:

Fact-checking is the assessment of data in public statements. In particular, this practice is used for the information provided by politicians, but it is also used by traditional media to verify news before publication. In reality, the cost of performing this task is high, and many publishers consider it a luxury, even if theoretically, it should be an essential exercise for anyone operating in news distribution.

According to a survey of 1,212 adults from Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism and Contently, when a trusted publisher features native advertising for a trustworthy brand, 41 percent of consumers gain trust in that publisher (Lile, 2020). Likewise, when a trusted publisher features native advertising for an untrustworthy brand, 43 percent of consumers lose trust in that publisher. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, trust in mass media among Americans has plummeted to 32 percent, an all-time low from 72 percent in 1976 (Brenan, 2021).

In the meantime, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks are (finally) trying to contribute with (partial) answers to the issue:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, 40 million posts have been classified as unreliable content and removed, including many published by the most recent former US President.
- After the January 6, 2021 siege of Capitol Hill, the former President himself was subject to de-platforming (a secret service procedure used in the past for organizations using social networks to organize and execute acts of terrorism).
- Nearly 350 million people around the world have accessed World Health Organization (WHO) information, which has debunked fake news by sharing scientific data through its online platform (“Immunizing the public”).
- We have also learned that the visibility of fake news posts is reduced by 80% if preceded by a message stating, “an independent fact-checker considers the content as not reliable or false (“Internationals Fact-Checking Network”).
- It is possible for anyone to collaborate with 60 independent fact-checker organizations certified by the International Fact-Checking Network on the basis of shared principles aimed at ensuring independence and autonomy (“Internationals Fact-Checking Network”).

Additional Fact-checking Best Practices:

- Check the profile of the author of the post before sharing. A recently created account, with little published content and a small number of followers may be an indication of a bot or a troll used to spread fake news (“Immunizing the public”).
- Remember that a photo could be extrapolated from its original context. Websites such as TinEye or Reveye could be helpful to finding its origin.
- Understand that videos can also be manipulated. Verifying authenticity could prove to be difficult, but Amnesty International’s Youtube Dataviewer can help find the original video.
- Recall that the names of many fake news websites are inspired to resemble iconic brands to catch the viewers’ attention. Check the URL keeping in mind that the difference between the original and the fake website is often a full-stop or a dash.

- Always verify the date of release of the news, and if other media have published the same news. If there are no other (credible) sources, it is highly probable the news is fake.

What Can We Do About This Problem?

Everything mentioned above can be shared as helpful practices for acknowledging and confirming facts. But it is critical to have legislators understand the danger of “fake news” and take the matter more seriously to defend our democracies with consistent and effective measures and to ensure freedom of expression as well as a human being’s fundamental right to Truth. This protects us all from subliminal manipulation, allowing people to make choices based on individual beliefs and not on a reality created in a laboratory to promote someone else’s interests.

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