

POLITICAL AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN THE ERA OF DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

Francesco Pira
Universidad de Mesina (Italia)

Resumen

Political and Public communication have to cohabit with the global plague of production of disinformation. Dozens of governments and dark actors hide behind false identities in various parts of the world. A recent survey of the Oxford Internet Institute has detected campaigns of disinformation deployed on social media in 48 countries, 20 more of the 28 identified in 2017. Even the technological platforms are unable to limit this phenomenon that overwhelm Institutions and politics. The most evident consequence of the disintermediation is the widespread incapacity of individuals to understand the flows of information (Report Infosfera, 2018). So, in a society that dominates individuals' actions, where self-produced contents and relations on SNS basis circulate as product, an exchange good, the manipulative risk becomes very high, as at the stake there is the construction of power on networks and on networked relations. This represents an evolution of Castells' thought who theorized that in the process of power construction there is the deployment of a global space of information and communication as open as possible to its participants [...]; and on the other [...] it will become necessary to build an information strategy to support its own interests and values within the rules of the game.(Castells M., 2001, p.154)

In such a framework we assist to a systematic over exposure of identities and relations (Cava A., Pira F., 2015, p. 32). A form of sharpening processes of self-representation that is grafted into a framework of a weakened society, in which everyone is left alone. This observation leads us from the item of representation to that of understanding. In the sense that for the understanding of the phenomena, social issues (Van Gorp B., 2009), something more than the mere information is needed.

Bauman highlights how modernization has led to the prevailing of the democracy of economy on that of culture, transforming it into an industrialized mass market of culture, thus subtracting instruments for interpretation and reducing more and more the

space for the creation of a collective culture, in favor of a "cultural" consumerism, consequence of the disintegration of social bonds and of more and more hit and run contents (Bauman Z., 2015, pp. 98-99). So the proliferation of informational cascades, the facility with which fakes news are relaunched through the web and persist in digital environments is the demonstration of how difficult it can be to identify them and give life to positive cultural transformations in which collective intelligence can play a propelling role capable of generating new aggregations that block the polarizing pressures and the shattering of social bonds.

Resumen en español

La comunicación política y pública debe vivir con el flagelo global de la producción de la desinformación. Decenas de oscuros gobiernos y actores se esconden detrás de identidades falsas en varias partes del mundo. El Instituto de Internet de Oxford, en una búsqueda, encontró campañas de desinformación identificadas que tienen lugar en las redes sociales en 48 países, tantos como 20 más, que los 28 de 2017. Ni siquiera las plataformas de gestión pueden frenar este fenómeno que supera a las instituciones y la política. El resultado más evidente de la desintermediación actual es la incapacidad cada vez más generalizada para interpretar los flujos de información (Informe Infosfera, 2018). Así que en una sociedad que domina las acciones de los individuos, en la que incluso el contenido de producción propia y las relaciones sociales circulan ahora en el espacio como un producto, una mercancía, el riesgo de manipulación llega a ser muy alta, porque está en juego es la construcción del poder de redes y redes de relaciones. Una evolución de la idea de que la teoría de que Castells en la construcción del poder será el despliegue de un espacio global para la información y la comunicación, lo más abierto posible a sus diversos participantes [...]; por otro, [...] se necesitará una estrategia de información para apoyar los propios intereses y valores dentro de las reglas del juego (Castells M., 2001, p.154). En este contexto, estamos asistiendo a un vetrinizzazione sistemática de las identidades y relaciones (Cava A., Pira F., 2015, p. 32). Una forma de agudizar los procesos de autorrepresentación que se inserta en un marco de sociedad devastadora, en el que todos se quedan solos. Esta observación nos lleva del tema de la representación al de la comprensión. En el sentido de que para la comprensión de los fenómenos, las cuestiones sociales (Van Gorp B., 2009), se necesita algo más que mera información. Bauman muestra que la modernización ha llevado a la prevalencia de la economía de la democracia en la cultura de la democracia transformándola en la cultura desarrollada del mercado de masas, por lo que resta de herramientas para la

interpretación y reduciendo cada vez más espacio para la creación de una cultura colectiva el consumismo a favor de una "cultural", a raíz de la ruptura de los lazos sociales, cada vez más éxito a la fuga de contenido (Bauman Z., 2015, pp. 98 -99). Así que la proliferación de las cascadas informativas, la facilidad con que las noticias son falsos reactivación a través de la web y persistir en entornos digitales es una demostración de lo difícil que es para identificarlos y cuánto más difícil crear transformaciones culturales y de identidad positivas en las que la inteligencia colectiva puede desempeñar un papel de liderazgo capaz de generar nuevas combinaciones que bloquean presiones polarizantes y la ruptura de los vínculos sociales.

Palabras Clave: hyperrepresentation, political communication, public communication, disinformation, emotivism, fake news.

1. The new dimension of Political and Public Communication in the era of disintermediation

Political communication is now totally developed within the mediated public environment (Pira F., 2012). But, while in the analogical era the media contributed to the construction of consensus we are now in the social era where politics exploits disintermediation to build a message based on emotional process that becomes so pivotal in political communication. We are facing dynamics that are undermining the foundations of democracy, where pluralism and competitiveness should find their equilibrium in a regular alternation and in the possibility of constructing a political dialectic that accepted confrontation and the rules connected to it. Thus appears to pass the dimension described by Castells in which:

Neither television or other media are able to determine, by themselves, political results, precisely because media policy is an extremely contradictory field where different strategies and actors come into play, with different abilities and sometimes unexpected effects. Mediocracy is not in contradiction with democracy, because it is pluralistic and competitive as much as the political system: that is a lot. [...] However, the decisive fact is that, without an active presence in the media, political proposals and candidates have no chance of gaining a broad consensus. Politics, but all politics must move through the media if wants to influence decision-making processes.(Castells M., 1997, p. 328)

In the era of disintermediation "the transition of public content of political interest in the media has led to the prevalence of media logic on the logic of politics" (Cepernich C.

Novelli E., 2018). If in the era of analogue media the spectacularization represented the distinguish feature of public and political communication, in the era of social media, self-representation is turning into an hyper-representation centered on a distorted view of the concept of performativity (Lyotard, 1983, p 121) which has a strong impact on public and political communication.

This "emerged fully in the last decade of US presidential campaigns: in the performative turning given by Obama to the forms of his campaigning, with the aim of transforming the democratic competition into a " collective representation " through public drama celebrated by the leader (Alexander, 2010), but also with Trump's hate campaign, who during the 2016 presidential election has made extensive use of crude negative campaign methods designed to damage the personal and subjective, even intimate, sphere of the rival more than his public role. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the Trump's preferred weapon of offense was Twitter". (Cepernich C., Novelli E., 2018, p.13)

Social environments promote the dissemination of "hit and run" contents. Here dominates the instant fruition as a function of which information prevails on knowledge. This brings us back to the concepts introduced by Jenkins in relation to the processes of knowledge construction where he states: that the production of meaning is more than the multiplication of individual interpretations; it implies a qualitative difference in the way we give sense to cultural experiences and this implies a profound change in the way we understand the subject of competences. (Jenkins H., 2009)

Today the addition of opinion prevails over the construction of a shared path of knowledge. We are witnessing the narrowing of the boundary line between the individual identity and his social behaviors, the route of individual identity construction is centered on the representation of the self through social networks and the consensus that generates. In the consumerist dynamic connections prevail on relationships, where the correspondence between demand and supply no longer concerns the relationship between subject and object, but the subject becomes an object in the moment in which he gains *likes*. Thus the principle of mass self-communication introduced by Castells is distorted, the individual does not seem to be able to determine social change and give life to new community contexts. Instead, we observe the proliferation of groups, tribes, with weak ties concentrated in the obsessive search for consensus, also through the instrumental use of false or mystifying contents, (Pira, 2018, p. 319) where the manipulation of public opinion, through social platforms, emerges as a critical issue that threatens public life. In the world government agencies, political parties are exploiting social platforms to spread garbage news and

disinformation, exercise censorship and control, and undermine trust in the media, public institutions and science. In the era in which the consumption of news is increasingly digital, artificial intelligence, big data, *black box* algorithms are influencing the challenge for truth and trust: the cornerstones of our democratic society. (1)

2. Post – Truth and opacity of contents

The daily has turned into an *infosphere* where the subjectivation of reality prevails over the process of objectification. In this context the pervasiveness of the processes of mediatisation have erased the category of reality in the perception of individuals.

"In digital society there is a systematic over-exposure of the identities of and their relationships" (Cava, Pira, 2015). The era of post - truth, a "media-content" culture, as defined by Ferraris, is the result and consequence of the continuous creation and circulation of documents and information, through the accomplishment of certain conditions:

- Virality, compared to the media world, the media- content is characterized by an exponential growth of interconnections between the elements that populate the network;
- Persistence, through the web documents are forever immortalized in the virtual space;
- Mystification, in the network it is always easier to create dummy identities that, for some, can become reliable sources of information;
- Fragmentation, in the network the sources of information become more fragmented and detailed;
- Opacity, in the web authority and responsibility become difficult to be accepted. Documediality creates a contextual fog, in which it is not clear who should impose an order upon the system. (2)

We are facing an exponential consumerism of information that generates a bit-economy that produces an increasingly widespread inability to interpret information flows. It is evident that disintermediation without tools and skills of interpretation leads one to believe that simplicity and freedom to use become axioms of truth, where the whole process of identity construction and knowledge acquisition is centered on the individual–user dimension. The data, the information is the economic good par excellence, profits are the incomes of big players of the media industry. What is perceived as an exercise of freedom by individuals - users, is a business generator for the few big actors who control this immense mass of circulating data, which continue to grow exponentially.

In the disintermediation era there is a reversal of Foucault's notion of power, who stated that it was not concentrated in a single institution. Power, in his vision, operates at every level of social interaction, in all social institutions and through each individual. Here instead we observe a turnabout of the paradigm of the relationship between power and knowledge and their correlation that reinforces each other. Foucault describes the development of discourses - intended as ways of thinking and discussing certain topics - which substantially delimit the modalities in which those arguments are known (Giddens, 2013, p. 384). In the digital society the construction of power is no longer the result of knowledge that generates credibility. We are facing a progressive loss of trust in institutions and official sources of information and knowledge (ex: journalism, school, science, church). In this sense, the Digital News Report 2017 published by the Reuters Institute and Oxford University points out the strong connection between the distrust in the media and the citizens' perception of political *bias*. This was particularly evident in those countries with strong political polarization dynamics such as: United States, Italy and Hungary. Politics exploits disintermediation for its power construction based on the nullification of the process of constructing knowledge where participatory culture does not find a chance of taking root to leave the field to polarization and a public opinion based on misinformation. Morozov claims that politics operates on the paradigm of compromise (Morozov, 2013, p.134). It is a no perfect conception, some citizens may be disappointed by the results of determined political decisions. Instead, the climate of perennial research for consensus, the transformation that is taking place in the *liquid society* has changed citizens into consumers who buy through the vote a ticket for a service that they expect tailored on their needs, without compromise, and it is evident that is causing a dangerous deviance in the field of politics.

In this context also the journalistic profession lives a crisis of credibility. Politicians no longer accepts confrontation with journalists. The media are accused of not being impartial and contributing to the proliferation of fake news. So for 87.24% of Italians there are no opportunities to access to reliable news. They do not directly link the conditions of the information system to the quality of democratic life and consequently to the concept of freedom, on the contrary, internet is considered an instrument of freedom, 77.30% believes that fake news does not undermine democracy. For 75.79% the traditional media do not overstate. 87.76% believe that the information circulating on social media are professional.

As already mentioned in other articles, modernization has led to the prevailing of the democracy of the economy on the democracy of culture.

Individuals take refuge in *echo chambers*, those groups and environments where they meet only with other individuals who tend to be already aligned on the same opinions. The de-ideologization of society has led people to search for new points of reference.

So the proliferation of informational cascades, the easeness with which fake news are relaunched through the web and their persistence in digital environments is the demonstration of how difficult it can be to identify them and to unmask *misinformant* (3), because it confuses the margin between fact and opinion. The result is that the public receives information and, even if it does not correspond to the reality of facts, if it is consistent with the opinion that the individual has, he shares it (4):

This definitely highlights that we are all exposed to this type of communication, insiders and public opinion because fake news displays some features that make them a very powerful tool. In particular, they show some characteristics:

1. Appeal: they are news that intrigue a large public and show an attractive power, because they can ride the wave of current issues and penetrate the agenda setting;
2. Virality: they are able to spread with great effectiveness and reach a large number of people. Fake news has a very high redemption;
3. Speed: the spread of fake news is rapid and uncontrolled;
4. Cross-mediality: this type of news is able to be transversal, or move from one medium to another so that, in many cases, the news appears on Facebook and subsequently is taken up by the other media;
5. Flow: fake news represent a flow, that is a series of information aimed to demonstrate a thesis or conveying public opinion towards a clear position that does not reflect reality;
6. Strength: fake news, even if unmasked, can leave a deep trace in the memory of readers and public opinion. (5)

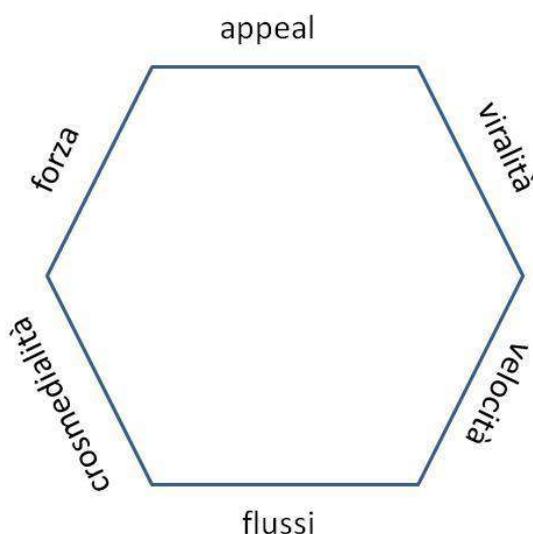


Fig.1. The exagon of *fake news* (Source: Pira F., Altinier A., 2018)

This perspective of digital life shows elements of extreme complexity from which emerges a profile of fluidity that overcomes the concept of dynamism which, in apparent contradiction, is combined with a capacity for persistence of some information compared to others according to the perfect combination of the elements included in the hexagon of fake news. Moreover the relation dynamics between publishing groups, journalism and social platforms shows a significant number of contradictions and opacity.

3. Conclusion

The rules of the game have disappeared, in the post-truth era the objectivity of facts has lose importance in the process of public opinion construction where pre-packaged slogans, emotivism or personal belief sover bear. Emotions and opinions not necessarily based on truth assume a truthfulness status as a result of the flows of information that circulate within groups that aggregate around preconceived positions. The rationality of the aims prevails over the set of interests and values and clear-cut strategies are adopted to penetrate public opinion.

Truth takes on secondary importance in the political language used by populism. The media become instruments for managing power. This connotation of the instrument brings us back to the definition of *bias* introduced by Innis that circumscribes the specific properties of the medium such as: influence, tendency, deformation, prejudice. He defines what the medium can or can not do. In this sense: "This bias is strengthened in a monopoly when some groups take control of this form of communication that identifies with it their own religious and political interests" (Miconi in Innis, 2001).

In an era where the pervasiveness of the media involves each sphere of individual social action we note the transformation of the social mechanisms of exchange and sharing of information that are increasingly based on the concept of homophilia: the architectures of online platforms promotecommunication exchanges between similar persons which do not generate cognitive dissonance but rather are more interesting for social resemblance. In this sense, homophilia support the strengthening of false beliefs, so interconnections move within closed spaces, echo chambers (Quattrociocchi, Vicini, 2016)

It is fulfilled what Morozov defines, the power of the algorithm, which modifies the perception of the real, alters the cognitive bias on the basis of which individual defines

the frame and attribute veracity to the contents 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 " (Morozov E., 2011, p.277)

Bauman highlights how modernization has led to the prevailing of the democracy of the economy on the democracy of culture, transforming it into an industrialized mass market of culture, thus subtracting instruments for interpretation and reducing more and more space for the creation of a collective culture in favor of a "cultural" consumerism, consequence of the breakdown of social bonds.

This crisis of democracy is crossing through all the western countries, citizens have lost trust in the institutions and therefore the cultural intermediaries are no longer credible. At the same time individuals show a growing inability to select, analyze and understand the flow of information they receive, consequently the social dimension of their lives is characterized by becoming increasingly homogeneous, delineating a process of construction of social action based on the paradigm of the choice made according to what is more similar to them or in line with each one positions.

Politics is losing its ethical dimension to slide towards a logic of exercising power also through the use of communication strategies focused on the manipulation and construction of alternative truths.

We are facing a challenge of global relevance that must be achieved through a new autonomous construction of meaning (Castells M., 2009). A process that is possible only if the relational dynamics and the construction of confrontation skills on different opinions can prevail over the perverse dynamics resulting from the distorted use of the *confirmation bias* and the hyper-generation of polarizing effects. This means leaving the click response model, as an evolution of the false power of the TV remote control, to use technology as part of an evolutive process that does not simply generate interconnections but is able to give life to new relational models in a real integration between real and virtual, as opposed to the dissolution of the real and to the uncertainty of identity.

Reference notes.

(1)The Oxford Internet Institute Report published in 2018 found evidence of formally **organized social media manipulation campaigns in 48 countries**, up from 28 countries in 2017. In each country there is at least one political party or government agency using social media to manipulate public opinion domestically. Social media manipulation is big business. Since 2010, political parties and governments have spent more than half a billion dollars on the research, development, and implementation of psychological operations and public opinion manipulation over social media.

(Source: Bradshaw, Howard, 2018)

(2) Ibid. pp.76-78

(3) Quattrocioni W., Vicini A., *Misinformation. Guida alla società dell'informazione e della credulità*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2017.

(4) Pira F., Altinier A., *Giornalismi, la difficile convivenza con fake news e misinformation*, Limena(PD), Libreriauniversitaria.it, 2018, p. 52.

(5) Op. Cit. *Giornalismi. La difficile convivenza con fake news e misinformation*, pag. 95.

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