

## What logic for false news in media information?

Mariselda TESSAROLO<sup>1</sup>

*Feeling manipulated leads to an unwillingness to rely on official sources and consequently to give greater credit to media sources such as social networks, or to unofficial rumours. Such sources are generally scarcely informed, if not even dedicated to misinformation. If reference theories are considered, it may be noted that manipulation in journalism may occur in numerous ways: not providing news, providing too much news, mixing facts and opinions, providing unfounded news etc. The public, especially in a democracy, should trust official media and the government, which should in their turn ensure proper reception and eliminate pockets of ignorance. In democratic states, news reports should differentiate between sources to allow the audience to compare them.*

Keywords: *media information, manipulation in journalism, mixing facts and opinions, freedom to decide and to choose, distortion of opinions*

### 1. Introduction

This paper is intended to highlight how a lack of understanding in communication is always basically present, in both speaker and listener, such as to cause the recipient of the information to always think he/she has been manipulated and the provider of the message to feel that he/she has not been sufficiently clear (Tessarolo 2007). Furthermore, it is important to consider that every piece of information, in order to be accepted and shared by the person who receives it, must have at least a minimum degree of credibility. In the current historical period, it is necessary to inform and be informed with great rapidity, both to take advantage of the means at our disposal and to provide information before anybody else (scoop). This often happens even before “facts” begin to take shape (Gili 2005). Such communication is obviously fragmented and often polarized, especially if the medium used for the purpose is the Internet. This medium itself allows false

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<sup>1</sup> University of Padua, Italy, mariselda.tessarolo@unipd.it

news or fake news<sup>2</sup> to become established, and the exchange of content generated by users is reflected in the way in which those who look for information on social networks learn and share information and content. Transmission “from one to many” is a monologue that turns into a form of democratization of information with the creation of *prosumers* (producers and consumers of news at the same time). The process leads to the formation of *echo chambers*, so that each group has a univocal, uncritical vision of its own, because the people belonging to it only look for news that confirms their opinions or news they already have knowledge of, abandoning critical faculties and discussion. This, in turn, leads to a polarization of positions and the impossibility of entering into a discussion with other groups.

## 2. How disinformation is created

The incomprehension existing among those who communicate very often generates the suspicion of being manipulated. Furthermore, a lack of trust in official sources of information leads to suspecting that “power” wants to hide something. This is one of the reasons why people tend to give more credit to unofficial sources, often mistakenly regarded as more truthful, even if hardly more informed and more neutral, of course. In this sense, one is inclined to believe false news and to generate some in one’s turn. Very often it is not a matter of fraudulent manipulation and therefore not intentional, but a reaction generated by the belief of understanding “more” and of not being prone to manipulation. Manipulation in journalism may occur in numerous ways: not providing news (censorship), providing too much news, mixing facts and opinions, providing unfounded news, difficulties concerning translation, use of terms in foreign languages etc. What was once called “rumour” corresponds to a logic of lack of trust in power and may be based on a background of credibility (Kapferer 1987). Official media should spread the maximum amount of information so as to avoid suppositions and uncertainties, ensure proper reception and eliminate pockets of ignorance. Rumours are “improvised news”, built up through a process of collective discussion. Everyone wishes to say and spread what they think took place (meaning: their interpretation), because they think their opinion is the one that is closest to reality, better informed since it is generated by a large number of contacts, especially on social networks.

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<sup>2</sup> False news means news that is not true; fake news means manufactured news, news created with a purpose. Here we consider them together.

Sometimes official media may also decide to convince public opinion with all the means at their disposal. One such example is Ronald Reagan, who “invented” control of information through communication, thus taming the mass media. It is a very sophisticated method in which censorship is used, but this is not highlighted and remains in the background. In the foreground is a flow of “guided” information. The “briefers”, that is, the generals providing news on television, were carefully chosen and interviews were not meant to provide information, but rather to deliver a message to public opinion. Journalists were satisfied with the wealth of news that the president’s man supplied them with, such as to not feel the need to investigate further (Fracassi 1992, 2003; Toselli 2004).

Opinion polls are like thermometers for measuring public opinion. Two main effects that may result are the bandwagon effect and the underdog effect. The first takes place when electors shift their votes toward the party that is likely to succeed (hoping to be on the winner’s side in the end). The second sees electors going to the rescue of the trailing party – for example, a person decides not to vote but then changes his/her mind and votes because he/she wants to avoid the defeat of the party that seems to be closer to his/her ideas. Another example of the underdog effect could be the casting of a “useful vote”, shifting from one’s favoured party to the party that risks being defeated, so as not to favour a third party that is especially feared. The bandwagon effect works like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In order to be able to truly speak of public opinion, not only must the subject of the polls be known to the people, but it must be discussed in the public space of the media and of social relations, and it must be part of the agenda in current political events. Polls are useful for cognitive purposes, even if they are used by the political class as a way of conditioning the electorate and as an instrument for giving the primary orientation to the government’s action. Another improper use of opinion polls may end up introducing forms of representative democracy that are completely uncontrolled (Barisione 1999, 119).

### **3. Relationship between technology and society**

All technological and information technology media providing news, including printed newspapers, keep us informed about what is happening in the world that counts; that is, what is happening in powerful countries. According to Silverstone (1991), their task is that of guiding the relationship and its structure. We may speak of a technological determinism that made sense at the start of information technologies, which were both a symptom, i.e. due to the social changes that produced them, and a contemporary historical transformation of social change.

The modification and the structuring of space-time relationships have generated interactions that are less and less dependent on the co-presence of the participants and are no longer restricted to a specific location. Such restructuring triggered a centrifugal force resulting in a proliferation of television channels and then the social networks. The belief that technologies by themselves may change society is not shared by all scholars. Castells (2012)<sup>3</sup>, for example, opposes this view with that of a new world that is not defined by technology, but by the uses allowed by technology based on the users' interests; what the users believe and what they would like to happen in the world.

For both Williams (1981) and Silverstone (1991), new technologies may be considered a symptom rather than an immediate cause of social change; they are the products of a historical transformation that is determined by other factors. In sum, technologies introduced us to a new historical phase where innovations are sought at an institutional level in response to cultural and communication needs. Starting with writing, technologies have always modified or restructured space-time relationships (Giddens 1994). It must be underlined that "the audience" is never meant in the singular form, but in the plural. The word in any case refers to those who listen and has since become a collective term in which the presence of both communicating entities is no longer necessary. It is no longer possible to establish the boundaries of the audiences, and the audience itself is a real object, or one outside its discursive construction. The reality of the audience is represented by a diffused and well-rooted set of daily practices that eludes any attempt to objectify it (Moores 1998).

#### **4. Function of political journalism**

In democratic countries, news is organized from different sources; comparisons between the sources themselves may be made by those responsible for this specific operation. It is a utopian idea to think that news is more correct and closer to reality if passed by word of mouth rather than transmitted by official sources (Barbato 1996). A journalist organizes known and unknown facts (as long as they are proven) with a narrative criterion that gives shape to a story. The task of the reader is the interpretation, that is, to decide and choose, because his/her answer and freedom are the essential ingredients. The task of the reader is to "break down the hypothesis" presented by the journalist and "reconstruct the event". This is only possible if the information provider makes the wealth of facts and sources

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<sup>3</sup> <https://it.ejo.ch/giornalismi/don-chisciotte-ed-internet-intervista-a-manuel-castells>.

available to the reader (Colombo 1996, x). Journalistic writing needs to be useful, clear, effective and devoid of complacency. This is the only way for it to be an instrument of freedom and not one of seduction. The press should be at the service of public opinion and should monitor public life in every democratic state. When society's moral convictions become weaker, then one falls prey to the demagogue and charlatan (Barbato 1996).

No truth printed on the second page will be able to erase a lie on the first page. Direct democracy is a myth that was already popularized by McCarthy in the United States<sup>4</sup>, but it may be found in numerous historical periods. It is a matter of exploiting popular fears that put wide bands of citizens in opposition with one another:

- conservatives come into conflict with other, more liberal conservatives who aim to preserve the existing situation even by way of changing political institutions: the resulting direction is toward direct democracy, intended as an involuntary appointment with the mood of dozens of local newspapers and millions of readers;
- the mainstream idea agrees with a movement of moral cleansing;
- with regards to the quality of popular following, authoritarianism has a greater following among weaker bands of population and anticommunism among wealthy classes (the middle class is not taken into consideration);
- an elite movement and a counter elite one clash.

Manipulation has always been one of the major problems of the media, and the same is true of information coming from power. Information from unofficial media entails the risk of a version of the facts that is different from the one proposed by official media being known or wished for. The violence of the actions of crowds is partly inspired by social facilitation, combined with the removal of individual responsibility (Gili 2005).

## 5. Dissent and consent

There are three instances for eliminating disagreement and putting an end to our dissent with a choice to which we all adhere:

- Tradition, which condenses and accumulates past experiences, a legacy of rules showing us the way to follow (of which we know the existence!).

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<sup>4</sup> The word "McCarthyism" is now used in political discussion to broadly indicate an atmosphere of generalized suspicion, a witch hunt determined by an obtuse and, eventually counterproductive, position (Fracassi 1996).

- Science, whose judgement based on observation and calculation identifies the solution that best corresponds to objective data.
- Consent, which explores different points of view and various possibilities of discussion, leads towards an agreement shared by the majority.

The first two instances have lost their authority, while the third responds to the need of individuals and groups to decide, resolve arguments and define consent about what is allowed and what is forbidden. Consent not only rests upon reason, but is also developed during an exchange or in the course of a deliberation. What establishes consent is not agreement, but rather the participation of those who made it: it cannot be imposed and it is legitimate only if everybody is part of it (Moscovici and Doise 1992, 7-8). In a society subject to changes, new problems, novel behaviours and unexpected differences, numerous cues for dissent and breakup are present. The quest for consent serves to give a frame within which novelties and controversies are absorbed and dilemmas stemming from unstable ground are framed (nuclear energy, euthanasia, AIDS, vaccines etc.). Consent must be circumscribed and, in all social situations in which it develops, its characteristic source is choice.<sup>5</sup>

Consent itself may be understood as the will of an individual to approve and share the fate of a group, if beliefs are shared. Finally, we should repeat that consent comes from practice and from reason.

Living together and group spirit help increase the risk that independent critical thinking is replaced by group thinking: the sense of belonging decreases the quality of judgement, both in the decision-making process and in ascertaining the situations that should be remedied. Group loyalty may lead to serious mistakes such as muzzling doubt and censoring divergences.

Polarization suggests consent as a means of changing the rules and norms of collective living. Its function is not that of eliminating tensions and maintaining a balance between antagonistic proposals, but of letting them modify each other, with the least possible degree of virulence, until a common element emerges. Far from representing a failure or a form of resistance, discord is in fact the most valuable spring of transformation.

The excellence of modern democracy lies in the fact that it has institutionalized consent in multiple fields. It seems a contradiction, but the various groups and committees whose task is to define research programmes, provide ethical rules on abortion, transplants and euthanasia, have the mission of finding agreement on a solution to be confirmed and formalized. Yet their true mission, rather than that of reconciling opposing points of view, is to carry the reflection

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<sup>5</sup> "Choice" means risk.

forward, assist the alteration of attitudes and settled rules, innovate the customs and ideas of a reticent audience (Moscovici and Doise 1992, 30). The role of consent in modern societies serves to put an end to uncertainties and tensions, allowing mindsets to evolve, and to transform social bonds and norms without breakups. Thus, instead of stagnating and sinking into conformity, societies acquire permanence and new strength. In other words, the arguments that are close to the dominating values of group members are collective, while other arguments are more or less individual. Debate allows them to be acknowledged. Given the inclination to overcome disagreement and given the degree of collective involvement, there will be only one decision aimed at consent and it will be the dominating decision. It is not the matter of a movement away from the mainstream (as for extremism), but of a movement toward a prominent value, meaning a polarization. In society, a decision aimed at consent is optimal because nobody yields more than their neighbour. One may say that conformity acquires consent in a permanent way.

## 6. What logic?

At the base of interpersonal and social relations is the ability to control and manage the impression made on others: in fact, we try to turn the situations in which we are involved in our favour. In mass communication, the subject at the centre point of a communicative relation performs a monologue and not a dialogue. Credibility is linked to the importance of the means and to the modes of relation in the relationships between sender and receiver (Gili 2001).

It is always to be hoped that television viewers have critical faculties: everybody should watch television and enjoy any cultural product without being manipulated or cheated (Gili 2001). The media must be credible, their power depends on how credible they are. In order to be so, the source must be sincere and well informed. The audience perceives the integrity of the media also based on the behaviour of journalists, and that may be felt as more or less correct. Journalists are often not independent, though, and they depend on owners and interest groups. Spontaneity is almost always an artifice aimed at manipulating, which leads to reality television and truth television. These, present themselves as depicting reality “as it is”, without mediations, but ample room for manipulation is hidden precisely in programmes of this kind.<sup>6</sup> Not lastly, we must consider the

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<sup>6</sup> Gili (2005) makes the example of the Italian programme called “Amici” (Friends), conducted by Maria De Filippi. The participants are not representative of the authentic young people of today: the problems they present to the audience are exaggerated, trivialized and made spectacular.

identity bonding that is spontaneously sought with the viewers. The sender tends to be a very convincing expression of its own audience and their tastes, in order to gain wide credibility. Gili observes that the *medium* thus becomes the spokesperson of the audience's interests in order to pursue, in the name of the audience itself, ideas and theses that actually belong to the medium, or to the power centres behind it. It may also happen that in the face of controversial issues, the media take positions that are necessarily equidistant from the parties in the field, stating that they want to respect their audience and the variety of positions existing within the audience. As a consequence, they penalise truth and justice, especially when the positions themselves may be ascribed to the weaker of the contrasting parties.<sup>7</sup>

False news should be analysed just like identifiable realities that, beyond their falsehood, indirectly reveal something hidden about society. In fact, they are accepted and spread by society only if they correspond to its deep expectations. Their spreading is possible when the conditions that are favourable for their acceptance are fulfilled.<sup>8</sup>

Manipulation is a constituent dimension of social and interpersonal relations. We wish to always present a favourable image of ourselves and to take advantage of the situations in which we are involved. The strategies of influence are always somehow relational and planned. Conditions of credibility are therefore important, considered as the relation between sender and receiver, and so are the strategies with which credibility is constructed.

In conclusion, keeping in mind that everything in social life is based on opinion and that, according to Durkheim, even science itself depends on opinion, because it is precisely from opinion that it draws the power needed to act on opinion (Durkheim 2005), public opinion may be considered as the power of the individual multiplied thousands of times (Seligman 2001, 83). In his study on the forms of authoritativeness, Bellini (2018) observes that the prototype of the current figure of expert undergoes a radical revision. On the Internet, what has more value – the expert's opinion or the weight of millions of "likes"? How is the expertise of the expert checked on the Internet? According to Bellini, we are still unprepared to answer this question. One of the most surprising changes in our society is thinking that being autonomous means being free (Sennett 2006). Once the individual was defined by his/her aspects of belonging, today the individual is defined by his/her choices. Bellini notes that autonomy is a relative good that, if

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<sup>7</sup> This position is called "ingratiation". It is a component of Impression Management, meaning the forms of behaviour developed to take over the other party.

<sup>8</sup> As in the case of war: censorship, disorganization of normal communication and information circuits, isolation of small groups in trenches, false news and popular beliefs (Bloch 1995, 96).

taken as an absolute principle, risks raising a barrier against the world, whose consequences are isolation and anxiety.

The ancient Greeks said that demagogy finds fertile ground only in democracy, because the distortion of opinions and persecution of ideas may take place only where opinions are free and have genuine political relevance.

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