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FAKE NEWS AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AGENDA

Gabriel-Alexandru TOMA¹

Abstract

This paper proposes a sociological research agenda for analysing the spreading mechanisms of misinformation in contemporary society. The contemporary fake news phenomenon is approached as an emergent outcome of inter-related technological, economic, socio-cultural and political factors that have made society vulnerable to misinformation. Those factors are understood as generators of various social dynamics rather than as direct causal determinants. In order to better acknowledge the conditions under which fake news is propagated and legitimated in digital society, news should be approached not only as a commodity that functions in a market-driven economy, but also as a social institution that regulates political discourse and public debate. Based on these considerations, the conclusions support the necessity of a more prominent sociological focus on media studies, which could build awareness of the performative role of language in the context of technologically mediated realities.

Keywords: fake news; misinformation; propaganda; attention economy.

Introduction

Misinformation is an important issue on the public agenda. Studies show that the circulation of misleading information on social media played an important role both in the 2016 United States presidential election and in the Brexit referendum (Bastos, & Mercea, 2017; Fourney *et al.*, 2017). Many countries are facing similar issues in terms of misinformation as a means of propaganda (Khaldarova, & Pantti, 2016; Wasserman, 2020). False stories and deceptive reports are employed by various interest groups to increase their image capital and gain social or political influence. Therefore, fake news has a significant impact on democratic processes by influencing citizens' capacity to act responsibly based on informed decisions.

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The phenomenon of fake news is linked to various forms of social polarisation that spread extremist attitudes and generate latent conflicts between groups with antagonistic ideologies (Spohr, 2017). In this context, the phenomenon of fake news threatens social stability and negatively affects the prestige of the journalism profession.

This paper proposes some directions for analysing fake news from a sociological perspective that could complement and strengthen media studies by contributing to an enhanced understanding of how misinformation ecosystems emerge in current digital worlds. Various sociological approaches might be employed to systematically address the problem of misinformation and formulate explanations of why fake news is a reality today and how it comes to play important social and political roles. After justifying the relevance of a conceptualization of fake news as a social phenomenon, we propose some tracks to analyse fake news through the sociological lens by focusing on different sociological branches: (1) sociology of influence and persuasion, (2) sociology of journalistic practice and media industry, (3) sociology of online communities and digitally-mediated worlds, (4) sociology of culture and discourse, and (5) social psychology.

Fake news as a social phenomenon

News as a genre is an institutionalised form of communication that operates according to rigid stylistic and rhetorical conventions (Miller, 1984). News is an object with symbolic authority and integrates clear norms about what is being communicated and how it is communicated. Therefore, the relationship between news producers and a public is based on norms of relevance and trustworthiness. These norms are collectively acknowledged and are sometimes taken for granted in news consumption practices. In general, news represents a mediator between humans and their social environment. By signalling what is important in the world, news delivers a definition of the world and provides people with interpretative repertoires to make sense of specific social realities. Consequently, news shapes the knowledge of the world in powerful ways.

The media of information have undergone multiple transformations related to the digital revolution (Meltzer, 2009). Foremost among these is the fact that fake news emerged as a particular subgenre. As understood in the present paper, fake news represents content that resembles the style, form and rhetoric of news as a form of institutionalised communication but is detached from the norms and conventions that approach reliable information as a collective good. Fake news is very difficult to differentiate from factual news due to several reasons. On one hand, people are not always able to verify the accuracy of the content. On the other hand, the evidence itself can be manipulated. Furthermore, the boundaries between fake and accurate news are difficult to draw, since both forms of communication circulate within the same channels and are based on similar consumption and

distribution practices (Fernandez, 2017): fake news uses the social legitimacy of factual news to influence public opinion.

This paper discusses fake news as a social phenomenon. Fake news can be considered a social phenomenon from several perspectives. First, fake news is widespread across social and cultural contexts, with digital technologies contributing to the rapid dissemination of misleading content in a public space. Secondly, fake news has impact on social order: misleading information influences voting behaviour, causes social movements, imposes issues on the political agenda, changes public perception and ultimately changes reality. Thirdly, fake news is a collective accomplishment: fake news results from various collective processes and practices, including not only the production of false stories but also their distribution and consumption and people's receptivity to the stories. Fake news is co-produced between news producers, news media and the audience that performs an act of authentication. Without people believing deceptive content, fake news would remain a work of fiction (Marchi, 2012; Tandoc *et al.*, 2017). The individual's behaviour alone cannot enhance the impact of fake news, but the coordinated actions and technological affordances that enable the spread of misinformation do. Fake news is influential because people rely on it to orient themselves in the world. Fourthly, fake news emerges through joint actions that work upon knowledge structures and social experiences. From this perspective, fake news is a social fact (Durkheim, 1982) because it exerts constraining influences on individuals' experience of the world.

Sociology of influence and persuasion

Revisiting classical theories of media influence

The number of publishing platforms has grown, and the news ecosystem has undergone significant transformations. One of these is related to the development of alternative sources of information that are outside the control of conventional gatekeepers as social actors meant to safeguard the credibility and quality of content (Bro, & Wallberg, 2014). The internet enables numerous content providers to enter the online news landscape. Since content production and marketing costs are affordable, users can reach a mass audience and influence targeted groups (Tandoc Jr. *et al.*, 2018). In particular, the virtue of the online space lies in its form of organisation based on principles of accessibility, equality and pluralism. Namely, the internet allows laypersons to participate in the production of content, inform a general public and spread their views at little cost (Coleman, 2017). The online environment is socio-technically organised to allow virtually everyone to produce and distribute digital media content. Despite the numerous opportunities for civic activism and mass mobilisation, the ease of information creation and distribution in the online environment poses great challenges for the quality of

the online news industry, an industry that has become vulnerable to fake news as a means of propaganda and manipulation.

While substitute forms of gate keeping practices emerged in the digital sphere, the legacy media started being criticised for allowing the editors' ideological biases and commercial interests to influence decisions about which issues to publish (Haselmayer *et al.*, 2017; Kaye, & Johnson, 2016). This lowered people's trust in the legacy media, which has contributed to the proliferation of yellow journalism under the form of websites that publish information unselectively.

In general, news media have the power to focus collective attention on key public issues (agenda setting) and to influence how different problems are defined and represented (attribute agenda setting). In a diffuse media ecology, fake news is highly influential in the creation of public awareness by establishing a dominant discourse regarding a wide range of policy topics (Brenner, 1988). People tend to allocate more importance to issues covered in the news, since these issues become part of their proximate social environments. Even if fake news is detached from events in the real world, it still pushes issues onto the public agenda and dictates the tone in which those issues are to be thought about. Fake news gained influence in a context in which legacy media are intricately connected with digital media. A comprehensive study of the media environment documented the agenda-setting power of fake news (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). The results show that fake news is responsive to the agendas of partisan media. Moreover, the same study evidences that both partisan and emerging media are susceptible to fake news' lack of fact-checking. Therefore, we assist at a process of intermedia agenda setting in which fake news has real consequences by influencing the agenda of various platforms. In these circumstances, the issue addressed by fake news becomes important rather than the facts. Since the media agenda is a result of the influence that some groups exert in society, fake news depends on the interest of those groups to legitimate particular social issues in order to gain political support for controversial reforms.

Taking stock of the pressure to innovate in the persuasion industry

The contemporary fake news phenomenon appeared in a context in which the persuasion industry faced increased pressure to innovate. News is a form of communication that appeals to an authoritative and influential voice to transmit a message of collective significance. Public relations specialists and other experts in strategic communication rely on the news format to promote particular ideas and offer more legitimacy to their points (Russel, 2015). Fake news, however, has been used as an alternative to traditional advertising and electoral spots due to the need for a more persuasive voice to speak for the public by using a familiar and accessible medium.

Public opinion is a powerful force in modern societies. With the development of survey research and polls, public opinion has turned into a universe to be

known and understood. Public relations, advertising and propaganda are social institutions that have developed on these grounds. Since political actors extract power by shaping and controlling public opinion, the development of effective strategies to manipulate people's beliefs and desires has also become a key priority in electoral campaigns. Media play an important role in the formation of public opinion by providing resources to address the general population, along with persuasive symbols to distribute political influence. However, public opinion is a social fiction used to designate forms of collective agency and make sense of the world as a governable realm in a democratic society (Wilson, 2013). Fake news has become a political instrument to build authoritative messages in a context in which public opinion is understood as an object that acts and is acted upon.

Deconstructing the politics of elections

The contemporary fake news phenomenon emerged in a context in which emotions are considered a pivotal factor in persuasive political communication. Television and digital media rely on a visual imaginary that favours a more personalised coverage of politics. Political debate is turned into a spectacle, with telegenic and charismatic political leaders as the main protagonists. In this process, voters are reduced to the role of spectators, and voting behaviour is understood as a decision-making process governed by emotions rather than by critical reasoning or instrumental motives (Garry, 2013). Visual and interactive media appeal to compelling and impactful messages able to generate political capital by promoting an emotional experience of the world.

Therefore, fake news appeared in a context in which politics is disconnected from policy. In the post-truth society of today, emotions rather than factual foundations are the basis on which political power is distributed (Rochlin, 2017). Websites, blogs, posts and other similar sources make it difficult for people to filter out biased content. The actual information ecosystem poses some challenges regarding how to select and identify a reliable source. Expert opinions are losing their authority and trustworthiness, as digital media has changed what counts as evidence. The rhetoric emerged in a post-truth world is based on a facticity of statements that are detached from foundational realities. Political platforms built on ambitious governmental projects are less influential than political platforms that manipulate human emotions and fears (Bakir, & McStay, 2018). Furthermore, the ideological groupings across the left-right spectrum are no longer meaningful to describe political orientations in a world in which the political game is played with new rules and strategies.

Sociology of journalistic practice and media industry

Understanding the business cultures of news production and dissemination

Legacy journalism faces significant challenges in the digital area. Social media have absorbed some of the editorial functions of legacy news media. The proliferation of digital journalism has given people the opportunity to access free news online. This has led to a decrease in the readership of major newspapers and audiences of radio and television stations, with media institutions being confronted with drops in advertising revenue. In this context, legacy journalism as an industry has not always been able to develop sustainable business models (Cook, & Sirkkunen, 2013). Since legacy journalism is a market-driven economy, sensitive to contextual factors and dependent on public or private sources of income, the transformations in the digital environment have brought about a crisis in the business model of legacy journalism organisations, which have accordingly become less secure (Schlesinger, & Doyle, 2014). Consequently, many media organisations have decreased the number of editorial and journalist staff positions. The pressure to adapt to the imperatives of the digital world has impeded legacy media organisations from investing in accurate reporting.

Media agencies face pressure to develop business models that keep them competitive in an uncertain digital arena. This has led to the development of a business culture that rejects investments that do not bring immediate financial benefits. Nowadays, media companies have switched from protective strategies to opportunities-based strategies (Franklin, 2017), a process in which the quality of the news is negatively affected. In an ever-changing digital world, reputation is volatile and does not represent an economically value asset. The development of short-term strategies to increase profitability has reduced the importance of building long-term reputation (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news has evolved in a context in which the interest in developing an attractive format for storytelling was more important than building a long-term relationship with the public based on trust. Therefore, fake news has appeared as a value creation attempt in a highly competitive environment driven by instant gratification.

The magnitude of the fake news phenomenon invites us to rethink journalism and find a sustainable business model in news delivery and consumption. One possibility would be to switch from a profit-driven to a community-driven journalism. In such a model, users would deliberately pay to support a social cause by deciding what type of content to consume. This might build loyal audiences and establish an editorial commitment to quality.

Exploring the identity of the journalistic profession

Collaborative editorial policy proved favourable for the development of the fake news phenomenon, especially in a context in which there was no systematic and powerful response from the journalist community (Richardson, 2017). Furthermore, a growing number of online information publishers resulted in a de-professionalisation of journalistic work. Journalism has started losing its identity as a community of practice, and nowadays, the boundaries between journalism, propaganda and activism are difficult to draw.

Citizen journalism appeared as a response to media corporations dominated by economic logic. Citizen journalism integrates forms of news reporting that rely on less institutionalised practices and allow people without professional journalism training to inform one another. Citizen journalism is a pivotal 'watchdog' practice in democratic societies (Watson, 2011). Driven by a desire to protect public interests, citizen journalism practices might prevent abuses of power and draw attention to governmental wrongdoings, especially when mainstream media seem loyal to political parties and other interest groups. However, the rise of the fake news phenomenon may be interpreted as an unintended consequence of citizen journalism. Since potentially all citizen can be involved in disseminating information, the distinction between formal and informal discourse has become more difficult to draw. Moreover, the authority of the source loses its referential function in the context of participatory user-generated content. Fact-checking platforms and stance-detection algorithms aim to recover the authority of the sources as an orientation strategy for news consumers (Verma, Fleischmann, & Koltai, 2017).

Assessing the regulatory frameworks in the diffusion of information

The rapid spread of fake news in digital environments caught society unprepared. The phenomenon of fake news has gained momentum in the context of a loose regulation system that was unable to preserve freedom of speech, while still discouraging the production of deceptive content. Nevertheless, the actors that orchestrated disinformation campaigns could barely be held accountable for the consequences of their actions, since there is no law to address the phenomenon in appropriate legal terms. The publishers of falsities can only be liable under defamation or commercial law if it is proven either that someone suffered reputational damage or that injurious falsehood brought financial loss to an enterprise (Pearson, 2017). Furthermore, fake news has become an influential phenomenon not strictly because someone produced deceptive content but because users shared and diffused unverified information in a network. In this context, it is virtually impossible to apply sanctions for the spread of misleading stories, yet this is basically the key practice that guarantees the propagandistic success of fake news.

Sociology of online communities and digitally-mediated worlds

Comprehending the consequences of anonymity on the internet

The growth of user-generated content represents a factor that has increased the amount of false information put into circulation with various aims: fun, profit, propaganda. Various interest groups have exploited the autarchic nature of the internet and have deliberately disseminated deceptive content to accomplish their hidden agendas. The anonymous and pseudonymous features of online media have encouraged the propagation of fake news (Pew Research Center, 2017). Authors of misleading stories and reports can remain hidden under an avatar, thus making it difficult for consumers to identify the true origin of a content and decode the message properly. This situation erodes important norms of social communication by making content creators less accountable for the information they spread (Persily, 2017). Also, anonymity can lead to abusive behaviour and inflammatory dialogue, which may create an emotional collective drive that increases the impact of false information. However, anonymity is essential in preserving the freedom of expression and right to privacy that characterise the internet as a democratic space.

Analysing the role of networks in mass communication and content circulation

The internet has democratised the production and distribution of information in all forms, so people have a larger variety of sources to access. In today's dynamic digital environment, content is circulated more than ever before. Online social networks allow rapid dissemination of information to a mass audience. The impact of this is a double-edged sword. On one side, online media are effective tools for constructive communication: they empower minority groups to have a voice; they make people aware of the latest scientific advances; they boost aid campaigns for people in need and so on. On the other side, online media feed fake news by taking advantage of the freedoms that characterise a democratic process. Once established, false or deceptive statements are difficult to correct due to the rapid, widespread and uncontrolled dissemination of false information (Mustafaraj, & Metaxas, 2017). As Mustafaraj and Metaxas (2017) reveal, the process of fake news circulation leaves online traces that continue to shape public thinking on issues with social and political relevance even after debunking.

Online social networks originated as tools for social interaction. However, they have progressively become used for entertainment purposes, marketing campaigns and ultimately for news consumption. Now, social networks are important sources of information about politics and public issues (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017). In this context, online media have promoted novel formats and models of news consumption that have favoured the spread of fake news and its increased social impact. Online media has changed the way news looks. For example, social

networks have unfolded a decontextualized space of meaning by favouring short-length articles and visual imaginaries. Moreover, smartphone technology has promoted a fugitive mode of news consumption in which users are more prone to react to an article's headline without reading the entire text. This kind of consumption practice makes it difficult for people to judge the accuracy of news reports, and usually the information is believed at face value (McQueen, 2018). Much of the current media do not support reflection and favour an incidental model of news consumption, thereby paving the road that has turned fake news into a phenomenon with social and political implications.

News as part of the journalistic genre has always integrated in its production process the pressure to get information to the audience quickly. Online media provide instantaneous coverage, which the legacy media cannot always afford. The culture of social media platforms favours instantaneity and produces a drive for immediacy that has established the grounds on which the fake news phenomenon has emerged (Bakir, & McStay, 2018). The interest to get stories immediately, as well as the rapid and widespread circulation of content make people (journalists and news consumers alike) pay less effort to time-consuming practices such as fact-checking or tracking down sources. The instantaneity of news delivery is complemented by the instantaneity of news consumption. Online media not only provide instantaneous information to their users; they also allow for synchronicity in communication (Mustafaraj, & Metaxas, 2017). Audiences can react immediately in support of a misleading content whose power is exerted in the very process of immediate consumption.

Social networks are organised on homophilic considerations based on geographic and ideological similarities between members. This form of social organisation mediates "social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information [users] receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, 415). Therefore, the digital media divide people into 'echo chambers', where users are exposed to arguments in one specific direction. This fragmented media environment implicitly invites people to rely on self-confirming sources when judging aspects of social reality, thereby reinforcing existing beliefs and legitimating misleading information (Spohr, 2017). Selective exposure to ideologically biased content and the technological mediation of echo chambers have fuelled fake news stories and amplified their impact.

Acknowledging the social power of algorithms

People have multiple sources of information in the digital world. In this context, human attention has become a scarce commodity that can be traded, bought or sold to make profit (Thrift, 2006). As a consequence, online companies are economic agents that operate on an attention market "in which platforms acquire time from consumers and sell access to that time to advertisers who want to deliver messages to those consumers" (Evans, 2017, 1). Since attention economics shapes

business models in the digital era, fake news has emerged as a result of how online companies generate revenue. Richard Lanham considers that attracting attention is a matter of style: “[T]he devices that regulate attention are stylistic devices” (Richard, 2006, xi). According to this perspective, style is the currency of the new economy. Under the logic of online connectivity, we assist to a transformation of style in order to maximise users’ interest. Outrage, anger and fear are influential rhetorical components in a digital information ecosystem fraught with fake news. On the one hand, events happen at a rapid pace, and users are not prepared to participate responsibly in this attention economy. On the other hand, business algorithms are not neutral to ethics and morals: algorithms are social technologies that have the power to define what is important in the world and thus enforce a system of values by focusing public attention on socio-technically emerging codes and canons (Verbeek, 2008). Profitability as a business value of tech companies has become a force that has taken over the quest for objectivity and reliability.

Fake news is also understood as a consequence of the business models that connect advertisers with website publishers by negotiating the amount of money paid per click (Braun, & Eklund, 2019). Digital platforms integrate ranking algorithms and real-time auction systems to distribute content in a network. These kinds of tools allow companies and other online agents to make profit by strategically placing digital advertising. Consequentially, the business models used by technology companies have facilitated the development of online spaces that encourage visitors to click in order to generate advertising money (Graham, 2017). This has provoked a rush for engaged audiences and incentivised web publishers to deliberately post objectionable content that generates revenue. The fake news phenomenon has been amplified by platforms that feature misleading sensational articles on trending ideas and topics. The information digital ecosystem is organised to nudge users to profitable behaviour by provoking affective responses from them. Fake news has proven profitable as a form of ‘clickbait journalism’ developed under the regime of affective capitalism. Affective capitalism unfolds a social order in which emotions are treated as commodities. Namely, emotions are activated and circulated, since they generate viewing time, which is converted into profit. Fake news has appeared as a form of manifestation in a context in which emotions are monetised and affects are exploited to produce economic value (Bakir, & McStay, 2018).

Fake news can be understood as a cultural implication of how search engines function. The most common search engines use business models based on various methods to estimate the costs of words and phrases. By monetising web content, words become economic resources: keywords and expressions are transformed into commodities that are sold on a linguistic market. This gives rise to a form of linguistic capitalism that has contributed to the spread of fake news by incentivising the use of profitable formulations (Graham, 2017). The algorithms of search engines have influenced language use on the web and marked off a decline of online language diversity by prioritising the vocabularies with more economic

value over others. Therefore, the financial models have significant effects on online discourse, since such models aim “to develop intimate and sustainable linguistic relationships with the largest possible number of users in order to model linguistic change accurately and mediate linguistic expression systematically” (Kaplan, 2014, 60-61). By taking into consideration that our language is interlinked with thinking, we can talk about an algorithmic mediation of what we know about the world and how we know it. Since our knowledge is technologically mediated, the linguistic biases of the search engines’ algorithms have generated the language of fake news with a performative role in the making of social realities.

Search engines, social networks and other digital platforms are designed to track online behaviour and record users’ preferences and needs. These kinds of platforms are based on market segmentation techniques that can help commercial agents or political organisations easily identify potential customers or supporters. Algorithms prioritise information and provide customised content in order to enhance user-experience and increase the effectiveness of the information distribution circle, in a process that aligns the interests of various stakeholders. The technical and functional affordances of digital media favour a more convenient model of targeted advertising, which increases the level of precision in strategic communication by allowing the delivery of relevant messages to targeted audiences (Livingstone, 2019). Even if the actual information ecosystem improves communication efficiency and performance, the ecosystem still poses some challenges and social risks. Driven by financial gains, online platforms allow advertisers to tailor their messages to different audiences. Specifically, the same advertiser could say different things to different people, thus producing an altered sense of reality. Confusion carried an anomic state as a social setting that encouraged the growth of fake news.

Reviewing instruments of audio and video manipulation

New technologies have changed the practices of knowledge production and provided new tools for digital content editing (Carlson, 2009). Software for photo, audio or video manipulation enhances the impact of fake news by functioning as instruments to produce fabricated but credible evidence in support of deceitful reports. Bots, paid commentators and fake accounts are resources used in propaganda campaigns to give a sense of widespread acceptance and circulation of content. By working as joint voices in support of various propagandistic initiatives, these fabricated reactions increase the capacity for fake news to spread and produce real effects in the social world (Shao *et al.*, 2018). The possibility to emulate the illusion of factual news and authentic debate through socio-technical manipulation has played a considerable role in making fake news influential in the contemporary world.

Sociology of culture and discourse

Enquiring into the changing nature of values

The changing philosophy of truth has encouraged a new commitment to notions of objectivity and neutrality. Contemporary culture is described by an increased awareness of the contingent nature of social reality. Moral, aesthetic and cognitive relativism are significant philosophical positions, postulating the impossible existence of a metaphysically valid standpoint that could function as an absolute standard of truth (Harsin, 2015). We do not live in a world in which truth is the ultimate goal that might be achieved through instrumentation and rational deliberation; rather, we live in a world in which truth is established relative to the position of a particular social actor in a status system. The contemporary fake news phenomenon has appeared in a cultural context in which the relativity of knowledge is assumed as the main epistemic stance. As Nick Rocklin puts it, “the truth of the post-truth is that truth does not matter” (Rocklin, 2017): reasoning and cognition cannot be separated from moral judgments and value-driven approaches, thus weakening the distinction between facts and values.

An increase of public trust in pseudoscience has also opened the road to the contemporary fake news phenomenon. Science as a social institution has started to lose its legitimacy and cultural authority, so that the ability of scientific facts and discourses to influence public debate has been challenged accordingly (Lidskog, 1996). Testimonial and anecdotal evidence has become more and more influential in shaping an understanding of the world. The facticity of scientific inquiry is obstructed by the sensationalist and emotional rhetoric found within online forums and participatory environments (Introne *et al*, 2018). Fake news is just a specific manifestation of a more extensive (dis)information ecosystem penetrated by pseudoscientific theories. In this ecosystem, scientific claims with no predictive and explanatory power, published in predatory journals, are appropriated as rigorous and reliable evidence; this process fuels yellow journalism practices.

Scrutinizing the performative role of language

News sharing over social networks can be understood as a form of communicative action. According to Jurgen Habermas, communicative action is “the use of language as a medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested” (Habermas, 1981, 99). Communicative action is based on an inherent communicative rationality as a sense-making scheme “oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus - and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims” (Habermas, 1981, 17).

Language is performative in the sense that “saying something is doing something” (Austin, 1962). The interpretation of a situation shapes reality by causing actions that produce social effects: if people define situations as real, those situations can become real in their consequences (Thomas, & Thomas, 1928). Words designate a world that becomes real according to how the world is defined. In that sense, fake news represents a form of communication that is performative. Fake news instructs audiences how to think about public issues, thus mediating modes of knowing social reality. This is important, since people act according to the understanding they have of the world. Digital media operate under particular “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1991) instantiated through manifold online discursive practices. Power is embodied in discourse and forms of knowledge, so fake news plays a political role by defining and redefining what counts as true. However, the socio-technical organisation of the digital world makes it difficult to differentiate between true and false statements and generates a sense of confusion that can be used for political gains.

Social psychology

Disclosing cognitive biases in information processing

The digital environment contains an overabundance of information, contradictory content and data of questionable accuracy. In the context of information overload, internet users are required to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure. Therefore, people rely on heuristics and mental shortcuts to process and interpret the information they receive through various media channels. This leads to different cognitive biases as vulnerability factors for misinformation (De keersmaecker, & Roets, 2017). People tend to use adaptative strategies and create their subjective social reality based on various errors: confirmation bias, illusionary correlation, selective exposure, belief perseverance and so on. These errors represent sociopsychological phenomena and organising principles of human cognition that have played a key role in the spread of fake news. Fake news functions as pieces of information that introduce cognitive clarification and help people make sense of the world. In the absence of relevant resources or experiences, false rumours are powerful devices in the communication enterprise, since they help people overcome a knowledge deficit and navigate the complexity of the social world. Accordingly, fake news assimilates powerful cognitive models of motivated reasoning that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and ideas.

Grasping the dynamics of group behaviour in digital networks

The digital environment has changed the way news is consumed: news consumption today is a participatory and collaborative practice. Citizens are

empowered to comment on and debate the news instantly, thus negotiating the meaning of the account by using both an instrumental and normative understanding of the social world. Digital media accommodate social interactions and the processes through which fake news is validated and authenticated discursively (but not factually). Validity claims are vehiculated in technologically mediated discussions, thereby turning fake news into credible and legitimate information to consider. Moreover, social networks support the formation of social relationships based on trust, so fake news is distributed in a social space in which people trust each other. Consequentially, users of the social networks do not assess the validity of the shared information because they assume that other actors have carried the symbolic costs of validation (Tandoc *et al.*, 2017). In this context, the diffusion of responsibility as a social process has contributed to the consolidation of the fake news phenomenon in actual society.

In explaining how society makes a transition from mass behaviour to social networks, Michel Maffesoli describes the postmodern era as an era of neotribalism (Maffesoli, 1996). By using the metaphor of tribes, Maffesoli points to the development of digital tribes as transient and fluid social groups whose members gather based on shared interests, beliefs and aesthetics. In this context, news sharing can be understood not only as a communicative act but also as a dramaturgical action (Goffman, 1956). News sharing is part of the impression management practices through which people express their self and consolidate their image. News sharing facilitates online interactions that create a dynamic of group life. Even if digital tribes are characterised by their transitory nature, they function as discursive communities guided by communal ethics through which members express their views and participate in a culture. News sharing is a social activity that brings people together, thus consolidating a sense of solidarity and collective identity (Polletta, & Callahan, 2017). Fake news exploits the sense of togetherness found in already established virtual worlds. Since emotions are essential components of group life, fake news reinforces various values and beliefs by manipulating anger and fear to serve the interests of political parties, companies or other agents.

Tracking down the emergence of social movements

The preference for opinionated rather than impartial news has fostered novel definitions about what it means to be informed (Marchi, 2012). News that makes a normative point has become more influential than news guided by the principle of neutrality. Embracing civic attitudes in online areas is now equivalent to expressing concerns for issues that reflect personal values and experiences. Digital media have affected the conception of citizenship by providing alternative forms of political action. In this process, digitally mediated platforms have redefined the dynamics that drive political commitment and have changed what constitutes civic engagement (Bennet, 2008). Digital communication has created not only

the foundation for making governments responsive to people's concerns through e-democracy initiatives but also the other way around: individuals have become more vulnerable to propagandistic attempts. Therefore, the decline of conventional political participation created a context that has favoured the spread of deceptive content as new connections to government have been established. Engagement in political discussion has taken different forms, and the digital opportunities for political self-expression trigger social movements to either challenge or enforce power relation.

Conclusion

Fake news is a complex social phenomenon whose determinants cannot be neatly separated in categories if misinformation resides in the interdependence between journalistic organisations, communication technologies, receptive audiences and governmental regulations. So far, media studies have approached the phenomenon of fake news largely from the perspective of cultivation theory; many empirical endeavours were conducted to explore how a particular medium determines a particular message with focus on the processes through which various messages induce effects on their audiences. By relying on traditional models of communication, media studies have somehow been ignorant to the structural processes that lay behind fake news. In this context, a more visible, coherent and theoretically sound sociological perspective in media studies might contribute to a better understanding of the nature of misinformation in present-day society especially when it is complemented by methodologies that consider fake news primarily as a social phenomenon and secondly as a communicational outcome and product of cultural consumption.

This paper has proposed a sociological research agenda to explore fake news as a social phenomenon in the digital age. Firstly, we consider that a sociological approach to fake news should revisit the classical theories of media influences and rethink the processes that coagulate the intermedia agenda setting. In a context in which media industry faces an increased pressure to innovate and many sources of information are outside the control of gate keeping instances, media studies should reveal the methods to deconstruct discourses as main drivers of persuasion and the techniques to interpret strategies that act on public opinion in a post-truth reality. Secondly, sociologically informed media studies should take into consideration the changes that characterize both the practice of journalism and the social organization of news media. The business cultures of news production and dissemination are based on economic models that give rise to less institutionalized practices and regulatory frameworks, which necessitates a close scientific examination and an attentive sociological inquiry. Thirdly, media studies would benefit from a sociological approach by considering the role of digital technologies in changing global media industries and cultural consumption practices. In this sense, future

research should consider the role of algorithms in shaping the objectivity and reliability of information in a networked culture. Issues of surveillance capitalism, linguistic capitalism, economy of attention and experience economy should be further taken into consideration. Moreover, an interdisciplinary study of fake news phenomena could not ignore the performativity of language and the regimes of truth that are built through communicative actions in online discourse communities. Finally, media studies should integrate a sociological focus by exploring fake news as a function of group dynamics emerged in digital networks. This implies an inquiry on processes that are heterogeneous in nature by generating new cognitive biases, by redefining issues of accountability and responsibility for content creation and distribution, as well as by enabling new practices of social identity formation.

Nowadays, fake news is considered a social problem. As such, it has become a top priority for technology companies and governments. Various initiatives have been established to cope with the production and distribution of misleading and deceptive information (Huckle, & White, 2017; Sethi, 2017). The actions taken to control the challenges of a post-truth media culture are built on multiple layers. They include various sorts of initiatives such as 1) grass root initiatives (e.g. creating a black list of websites that produce fake news); 2) specialised initiatives (e.g. developing news curators through algorithms and crawling techniques); and 3) governmental initiatives (e.g. legislative undertakings meant to censor some messages and impose sanctions on media trusts that vehiculate untrustworthy information). The initiatives rely on different political philosophies: some of them are based on liberal principles by favouring participation and dialogue, while others seriously threaten the freedom of expression necessary in a democratic society. The current legislative initiatives to target fake news are contested, as they foster authoritarian regimes of censorship. Regulations might silence dissenting and critical voices and give rise to abuses rather than safeguarding the public from false information. Other initiatives that rely on computational or fact-checking approaches usually have minimal impact, since such approaches face difficulties in disseminating corrections. Also, they rely on a philosophy detached from current social realities: evidence-based reasoning is not efficient in the post-truth world. Therefore, current efforts to combat fake news reveal a misunderstanding of the issue.

We argue that the popular discourse focuses predominantly on the role of technologies in the creation and spread of misleading information but ignores the influence of other factors that have contributed substantially to the emergence of the fake news phenomenon as we know it today. Social networks and other online platforms operated in a context in which society has been already vulnerable to propaganda and other similar actions by amplifying the risks that derive from the use of technologies. There is no single factor responsible for the spread of fake news, but the fake news phenomenon has emerged through the joint influence of technological, economic, sociocultural and political factors on human interactions and practices.

Many initiatives might be subject to failure because they miss an important piece in the puzzle: namely, there are multiple causes of the fake news phenomenon that might be noticed by embracing a more prominent sociological focus in media studies. Fake news does not only depend on technologies and their business models but also on the rationality on which politics is done and on various social processes and dynamics. While the current initiatives are focused on handling misleading textual content in the news industry, new advances in artificial intelligence and computer graphics pose important challenges in the dissemination of deceptive news in credible forms. In this context, there is a critical need for measures to improve people's media literacy. However, the most common measures do little to educate the public about the consequences of fake news on the lives of ordinary people.

Fake news is a complex social phenomenon that appears at the intersection of various contextual factors that influence information processing at a social level. This discussion in the paper also provides insights that support the necessity to complement fact-checking and computational measures through initiatives that empower news consumers and build awareness of various social configurations and technologically mediated realities.

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