

DISINFORMATION: NOT 'JUST' POLITICS

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POLICY STATEMENT

Disinformation is as old as communication itself. But the last five years have brought new stakeholders into the information ecosystem, rearranging the previous set of powers. The election of Donald Trump as president of the world-leading economy and the referendum that voted for the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, both in 2016, are milestones of a new scenario, where disinformation is no exception or a side effect. It is instead on an exponential rise, just like an epidemic. As the context is no longer the same, social remedies should be updated too.

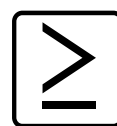
BACKGROUND

The emergence of the media is closely linked to the consolidation of liberal democracy: a social technology for mediation of the public sphere, providing checks and balances for preventing abuse from constituted powers [1]. If the newspapers were at first mostly opinion editorials, they soon changed into journalism as we know it today, with facts as its raw material and the news as its product. The technique allowed scaling up the information outreach in a time of an ever-growing literate population.

Although it is not a mere transcription of a given reality, but one among other possibilities of representing it, the news must never lose sight of the fact. It follows a methodological procedure and is subject to a professional code of ethics. Even if the boundaries are crossed, whether deliberately or unintentionally, they still stand as landmarks for accountability.

Nonetheless, the bad uses have helped pave the way towards the current situation. "Omissions, selections, framings, editing hierarchies, and even outright lies" [2] by the media have opened up the way to generalized loss of confidence.

Then, the advent of the internet, social media, and mobile devices comes as a coup de grace. The access barriers fall, making anyone simultaneously producer and consumer of public information. Public communication, once mass communication, becomes "mass self-communication" [3].



What seemed, at first, a paradise for democracy, with the possibility of direct hyper-participation, is now seen ultimately as a threat to life in society as we know it. Social networks follow the logic of entertainment, favoring emotional rewards over “true” information, creating echo chambers where previous assumptions are confirmed [4]. This is a perfect storm scenario for disinformation to multiply.

FINDINGS

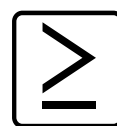
Fake news is not news. This is why experts prefer to use “disinformation” to translate the full extent of the phenomenon more accurately [5]. They spam from false facts to false agents or contexts, all wrapped up as an imitation of a news story. Their aims might be political, religious, or moral. Or, yet, economic. Indeed, in Europe alone, the Global Disinformation Index estimates that disinformation websites receive more than \$76 million a year in advertisements [6].

Thanks to our digital footprints, these messages can be micro-targeted according to our behavior. Only 68 likes are enough to predict with 95% accuracy the skin color of a social network user, according to a research later used by Cambridge Analytica to influence the 2016 elections in the United States. With 300 likes, it is possible to know people more than they know themselves [7].

False information becomes especially dangerous at scale. It spreads by contagion, shared by people, or even non-humans. The bots, or robots, are automated accounts disguised as human beings that artificially conduct public perception and obliterate attention to legitimate information [8]. They account for a great share of the data flow. During the campaign for Brexit, for example, 32% of all traffic on Twitter about the referendum was generated by bots [9].

The pandemic of the new coronavirus has brought fake news into the light again. While mis/disinformation is not new to this field either, the new “discommunicative” strategies significantly increase its damaging potential.

To face the disinformation crisis, many news media have lowered their paywalls. On another front, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube have declared joint efforts to combat fraud. But a survey in April 2020 showed that most of the content in non-English languages, for instance, having already reached millions of users, had not been dealt with by Facebook [10].



CONCLUSIONS

Fake information (either text, image, audio, or video) is no longer an accident but a business model. It is a piece, or a series, of information deliberately, massively, and strategically created and shared in order to deceive or mislead and take economic or political advantage.

Widespread disinformation has made us unable to distinguish truth from fake, what is linked to reality and what is not. We then become indifferent to facts. "Alternative facts" threaten to govern an alternative information system instead. The European Commission named this phenomenon as an "infodemic": "It is the disease of the century" and "we will never do enough" [11].

And things may get worse in the near future, when new technologies like 5G and the Internet of things will generate even more data. To navigate such an amount of information, mediation institutions are more than ever necessary. It is up to us to choose which one to legitimate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

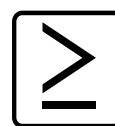
How can democratic institutions, based on processes that require time for debate and maturation, survive the threat of disinformation? The most recommended antidote has been to reinforce journalism and journalistic practices, like fact-checking. However, fact-checking has a limited effect on the misperceptions caused by fake facts. Moreover, a counterattack using journalism is a lot more expensive and more time-consuming.

Other policy recommendations include measures to increase Internet user literacy. Nonetheless, besides attributing the responsibility to the victim, such initiatives have also shown little efficiency, since they focus on reacting to the problem rather than seeking to prevent it. Furthermore, a significant part of the population cannot afford to pay media subscriptions or even browse web pages, staying confined to the boundaries of social media channels to which mobile data plans allow free access (zero-rating). Even worse, new technologies like deep fakes are hardly detectable even to well-trained eyes.

Experts consider regulating social media platforms, just as journalism is regulated, to be the main step to fight fake news. As gatekeepers and controllers of information flow on the internet, these companies should be accountable for such violations.

Another remedy are the "good bots", which can be effective in fulfilling the old saying "follow the money". These algorithms warn companies about ads placed on web pages that have demonstrated to be fake news outlets.

Finally, the economist Julia Cagé [13] suggests a structural reframing of media enterprises into non-profit organizations. This could minimize interference by economic interests and help the population recover confidence in the media as a key player to assure democratic principles.



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