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Fake news: a new political ingredient?

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INTRODUCTION

Once wars were fought with machine guns, rifles and artillery causing sufferance and death all over the planet. Today, even if this kind of traditional conflict is still active in many places of the world, there is an unconventional warfare based on words, images and illiteracy, mostly present in social networks: the war of **disinformation**.

It is not by chance that nowadays a random Facebook post without any authoritative sources seems to be more credible than the word of an expert – whoever he is, a doctor, a graduate, a professor or a journalist. In lieu of academic knowledge, the people apparently prefer to believe someone with a homemade cultural baggage, someone who is often totally unknown to universities and claims that the best teacher is the so-called ‘university of life’, which could be quite useful in sentimental relationships but that is absolutely not fit for complex issues such as vaccines, immigration or economics. The direct consequence of this change in contemporary societies is the uncontrolled proliferation of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram profiles and pages purposefully created to share fake news that in many cases cannot even be recognized by most of social users who still believe them even after that a fact-check publicly demonstrated that the truth of matter is totally different.

Watching almost helplessly while this multimedia poison spreads worldwide leads us to asking some questions about this unprecedented phenomenon.

First of all, are there similarities among fake news? Who produces them? How do fake news affect public opinion in different countries? Are there any countermeasures taken by governments? Which are the future prospects for this global problem?

According to the Business Insider¹, the top 20 fake news shared during the 2016 American election outperformed the top 20 real news of the United States, getting more engagement than the stories that were published by mainstream media outlets.

¹ “A report that fake news ‘outperformed’ real news on Facebook suggests the problem is wildly out of control”
– Rob Price, 11/17/2016

Moreover, in July 2018 ANSA² reported a research by Infosfera that really gives out the extent of the problem: 82% of Italians cannot recognize fake news.

What is the potential damage of this situation? Whoever has got enough economical power can set up a personal fake news factory to produce false stories that are beneficial for one candidate. The largest part of the electorate, without adequate tools, is not able to distinguish fantasy from reality and this implies a distortion of the election results with a deep modification of the future of an entire nation.

Due to the nature of fake news, continuously produced by thousands of profiles worldwide and constantly being disproved by the traditional media, analyzing this phenomenon with an empirical method would require resources that are well beyond a master thesis. Instead, considering these two variables, this approach “in the field” can pave the way for future in-depth analysis.

In detail, the best known fake news in Italy, Spain and in the United States will be qualitatively analyzed in a research to find out the ideal ground to grow the seed of disinformation.

Before the elections of March 2018, even the New York Times³ warned about the imminent danger of fake news in Italy, meanwhile the United States are the place where the fake news first landed in the 21st century. Spain, instead, represents an interesting case because Spanish is the 3rd most spoken language in the world and this allows the diffusion not only in Europe but also in Latin America. For these reasons, the United States, Italy and Spain might be three fascinating case studies.

The Japanese general and philosopher Sun Tzu once said: “Know your enemy and know yourself and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster.” Given that fake news are the enemy of contemporary democracy, this thesis can shed light on this think of our society to help and ideate new solutions against the problem.

² “L'82% degli italiani non sa riconoscere una fake news” – 7/23/2018

³ “Italy Braces for Fake News as Election Approaches” – Iliana Magra, 3/1/2018

Every content will be evaluated through visual appearance, grammar (if a text is present) and typology.

“A spectre is haunting Europe – Karl Marx would say if he were still alive – the spectre of fake news.”

CHAPTER 1 – WHAT ARE FAKE NEWS?

The Collins English Dictionary defines *fake news* as the “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.” Because of its large use in the last American elections, this term was named Collins’ Word of the Year 2017. About this concept, ‘Journalism, fake news & disinformation’, a paper released by UNESCO, introduces a specific distinction. Normally we call **misinformation** the spread of a piece of information that is false even if who disseminates it thinks that it is true. **Disinformation** happens when information is false and the person who shares it knows that the truth is different. The definition of the document says: “It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformationed by malicious actors.” There is a third category, called **malinformation**, used to intend “information, that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country” without any public interest.

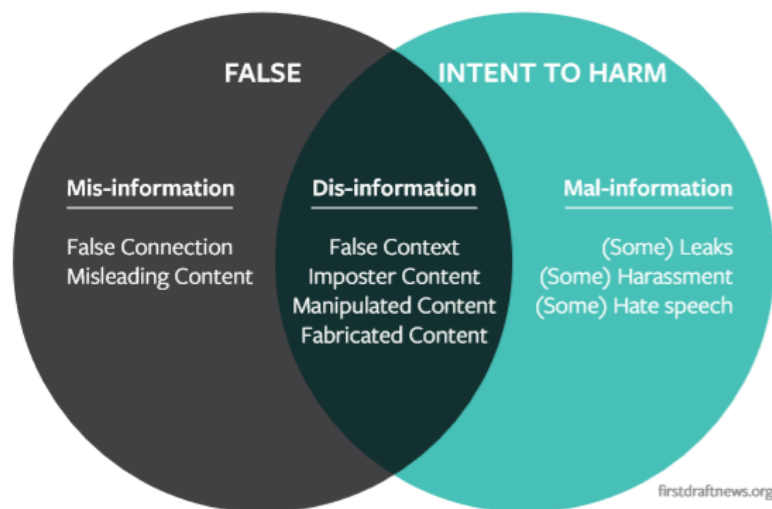


Figure 1: Distinction between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation

It is undeniable that the latest campaign in the USA saw the massive presence of artfully fabricated news in order to shift the balance of votes from one party to another, as stated by Hillary Clinton and unofficially confirmed by the huge FBI investigation better known as Russiagate.

1.1 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Differently than what we could imagine, fake news are not just the fruit of the 21st century. History teaches us that over the centuries the greatest leaders of mankind often resorted to this expedient to be seen in a new light or just to highlight their virtues and hide their flaws. One of the first to use this instrument of consensus was Ramesses the Great in the 13th century BC with his propaganda of the Battle of Kadesh, depicted as an amazing victory for the Egyptians against the Hittites which actually was a stalemate. After him, many followed in his footsteps, beginning from Julius Caesar. In his *De Bello Gallico*, the first Roman emperor described the conflict against the Gauls omitting the negative aspects of his army and his mistakes, emphasizing the backwardness of the enemy to be perceived as a all round hero. Learning from his predecessor, Octavian Augustus deliberately portrayed his rival Mark Antony as a womanizer and puppet of Cleopatra VII.

Not only famous characters of history made use of this trick, but also common citizens joined the list of fake news producers. During the Jacobite rebellion that took place in Great Britain between 1745 and 1746, some printers printed news reporting that the King George II was ill to try and destabilize the establishment.

Other times the source of lies was a newspaper or generically a medium: when in 1835 the New York Sun suffered a sales crisis, the director of the newspaper decided to make up the *Great Moon*

Hoax. The journalists deliberately wrote articles about bizarre creatures living on the moon, observed by a real-life astronomer. When the New York Sun admitted the fictional nature of the news,



the newspaper suffered only a small economical backlash after seeing many new subscribers which obviously meant more incomes.

Another case of authoritative misinformation took place in Great Britain in 1917, one year before the end of World War I. To oppose German propaganda, the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* published articles from anonymous source that claimed they had visited a “Kadaver” factory in Germany, a horrible imaginary place to extract glycerine from the corpses of dead soldiers to produce margarine and soap.

However, the best-known fake news of modern history was fabricated by **Orson Welles** – radio host of Columbia Broadcasting – in 1938 to popularize the 1898 novel *War of the Worlds* by Herbert George Wells. In that occasion Welles made his listeners believe that the Martians landed on Earth to neutralize the whole mankind with death-ray guns. The program deceived thousands of Americans with a news-like format, interrupting the broadcasting of music with news updates just like a real journalist would have done. As a matter of fact a really thousands of people were so alarmed that they immediately called the police, a consequence that was not calculated by the producers of the show.

This single event perfectly shows the power of communication. Separating his intellectual stature from his distorted beliefs, the former Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels once said something extremely useful to understand the success of fake news: “a lie told once remains a lie but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth.”

The transition from the original World Wide Web invented by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 to the so-called **Web 2.0** is the right key to interpret Goebbels’ words. Indeed years ago there could have been hundreds of websites publishing deceitful contents but without social networks their propagation range was confined to the few users who had already known the existence of the source. Furthermore before the introduction of website builders such as Wordpress, Wix and Weebly, owning a web domain was not as easy as it is today. For these reasons, virtual disinformation before 2005 – year of birth of Web 2.0 – could not be considered a problem because of its poor ability to spread due to the lack of technical means and potential “customers”.

Thanks to Jack Dorsey, Kevin System and Mark Zuckerberg – founders respectively of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook – since February 2004 everything has changed, giving contents the opportunity to be shared, retweeted and reposted wherever we want.

1.2 HOW TO RECOGNIZE FAKE NEWS



The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) drew up a helpful vademecum to avoid the pitfalls of disinformation shared via Internet. In the infographic below we can see 8 simple steps to verify the nature of the suspected news.

Before doing anything else, the first suggestion is “**Consider the source**” namely controlling the site to check whether its contacts, mission and domain are plausible. According to an article⁴ of the Italian newspaper *Repubblica*, the domain extension al-

so counts to guarantee the goodness of the source: domains like “.io” or “.com.co” must put the visitor on the alert. Generally these websites deceive the reader by publishing fake news among real news to appear more credible.

“**Read beyond**” is the second step to judge the goodness of a piece of news because most of the times the headline are deceptive and biased, reporting only a part of the

⁴ “Fake news, 10 regole per riconoscere le bufale” – Deborah Ameri, 12/03/2016

story. The following part, “**Check the author**”, concerns the identity of the writer that sometimes might be missing or linked to other fake news. In this case the best way to find out the truth of matter is the finding of “**Supporting sources**”, preferably authoritative ones. The fifth element, “**Check the date**”, introduces an interesting cue: some fake news might be disproved and come back after a long time, finding new indignant people who will share them with their contacts list. As suggested by the aforementioned Repubblica’s article, other times an old photo might be decontextualised to prove something wrong. In this case the guidelines suggest to download the image and use *Google Images* or *TinEye* to realize the origin of the file.

Further on the next step is called “**Is it a joke?**” implying that the news at issue might be product of satire. An obstacle to the answer is certainly the ability to distinguish between real and fake news and this cannot be taken for granted in 2018, as we will see later.

Unfortunately the more steps we count, the harder they become: “**Check your biases**” recommends to consider if one’s beliefs could affect the judgment which is really difficult to admit, especially in today’s politics where parties look more like factions and not just groups of people with similar ideas.

The last part of the table consists in “**Ask the experts**” like a librarian or a fact checking website such as *FactCheck.org*, *Snopes.com* and *PolitiFact.com*, which could be faster and would not imply the embarrassment of believing an obvious falsity.

Last but not least, Deborah Ameri of Repubblica suggests not to believe amateur websites with unprofessional graphics and layout maybe with titles in caps lock.

These are general suggestions to recognize examples of misinformation. Because our case studies will be taken from journalistic articles, there will be no need to try and understand whether there are fake news or not. On the contrary, every example will be considered mostly for its grammar, the size of its letters, the use of punctuation and its image.

1.3 CLASSIFICATION

Fake news are not all the same. Whenever a web surfer stumbles across a weird piece of news, it might be helpful to know the reason why someone would produce fake news, which is deeply linked to the classification of corrupted information. As Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow⁵ assert in “*Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*”⁶, there are two main reasons that induce someone to create misinformation.

The first is simply **pecuniary** and “this appears to have been the main motivation for most of the producers whose identities have been revealed.” It is widely known that nowadays newspapers and websites gain part of their incomes from advertising. Banners, pop-ups and auto-play videos assure earnings for the companies who finance these websites whenever someone clicks on – willingly or by mistake – the advertisement. The more a piece of news is interesting, the more people will read it and the more firms will be attracted to this website to appear in their pages. Similarly the fake news’ business aims at reaching the biggest number of clicks possible. Thanks to platforms such as Google AdSense, Paul Horner – former producer of fictitious news – declared to the *Washington Post*⁷ that he was earning 10’000 dollars a month with peaks of 10’000 dollars a day for the most viral stories.

Beyond economical purposes, disinformation can be brought to life for **ideological** motivations. “Some fake news providers – Allcott and Gentzkow affirmed – seek to advance the candidate they favor”, although other times the ideology behind this gesture is more complex than how it appears. Actually there are cases of people that invent stories out of thin air just to embarrass the voters of the opposite party by showing the world their ingenuousness.

⁵ **Hunt Allcott** is Associate Professor of Economics at New York University and **Matthew Gentzkow** is Professor of Economics at Stanford University in California. Both are Research Associates at the National Bureau of Economic Research of Cambridge in Massachusetts.

⁶ Published on *Journal of Economic Perspectives* — Volume 31, Number 2 — Spring 2017 — Pages 211–236

⁷ “Facebook fake-news writer: ‘I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me’” – Caitlin Dewey, 11/17/2016

This subgroup of phony stories – even if Alcott and Gentzkow did not name it in their paper – could be referred to as **satirical**. As we will see later, satirical fake news are becoming increasingly relevant these days, quantitatively speaking. Notwithstanding the origin of these stories is patently humorous to their creators, there are still many internet users who believe them. This activity that we could define recreational, regularly raises moral questions upon the circulation of fake news: instead of helping to solve this problematic situation, why these people keep laughing at less literate citizens making the state of affairs worse and worse?

2. FAKE NEWS IN THE WORLD

This chapter will be dedicated to a merely qualitative analysis of some of the most famous informative counterfeits in recent history. For a better comparison among fake news in an international context, this examination will rely on examples from the **United States, Italy and Spain** to see whether there are some keywords or common characteristics in all these countries. For the analysis of the American case, a journalistic selection made by the Business Insider⁸ was chosen to study these pieces of fake news. In Spain, El Pais⁹ was a useful source to search for the best known *noticias falsas*, meanwhile in Italy the cases selection derived from a personal experience on social networks after years of reading Italian newspapers.

Information about Facebook shares and interactions comes only from journalistic sources.

2.1 UNITED STATES

In the sea of disinformation that washes the shores of several countries, the United States probably were the first nation to show the world the real possibilities of a spoiled informative system. Although there have already been conspiracy theories for years about the 9/11 attacks and other crucial events, the American people really got in touch with fake news in 2016, a few months before the general election.

Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement

TOPICS: Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump



⁸ "This is what fake news actually look like – we ranked 11 election stories that went viral on Facebook" – Hannah Roberts, 11/17/2016

⁹ "España también tiene noticias falsas" – Llanersa, Colomé, 1/28/2017

2.1.1 THE POPE’S ENDORSEMENT FOR TRUMP

Many might remember the headline in the image below: **“Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement.”** After a long dispute between the leader of the Catholic Church and the republican candidate about Trump’s wall at the border with Mexico, thousands of Americans believed this piece of news published in July 2016 by the satirical website *“WTOE5 News”*. In truth *wt0e5news.com* – now down – explicitly declared in one of its pages that *“WTOE5 News is a fantasy news website. Most articles on wt0e5news.com are satire or pure fantasy”*. Probably, considering the success of this famous piece of fake news, one simple disclaimer was not sufficient to make every reader understand that the Pope never endorsed an American presidential candidate, as confirmed by important web portals such as FactCheck¹⁰ and Snopes¹¹. Right after this article was copied by *EndingTheFed.com* and made the story reach **961’300** Facebook engagements by November, according to BuzzFeed.

Looking at the headline, what catches the reader’s attention is the research of sensationalism in this case determined by the term *“shocks”*. However, at first glance the text of this piece of news could seem the product of a real journalist, grammatically speaking:

News outlets around the world are reporting on the news that Pope Francis has made the unprecedented decision to endorse a US presidential candidate. His statement in support of Donald Trump was released from the Vatican this evening.

“I have been hesitant to offer any kind of support for either candidate in the US presidential election but I now feel that to not voice my concern would be a dereliction of my duty as the Holy See. A strong and free America is vitally important in maintaining a strong and free world and in that sense what happens in American elections affects us all. The Rule of Law is the backbone of the American government as it is in any nation that strives for freedom and I now fear that the Rule of Law in America has been dealt a dangerous blow. The FBI, in refusing to recommend prosecution after admitting that the law had been broken on multiple occasions by secretary Clinton, has exposed itself as corrupted by political forces that have be-

¹⁰ *“Did the Pope Endorse Trump?”* – Sydney Schaedel, 10/24/2016

¹¹ *“Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President”* – Dan Evon, 7/10/2016

come far too powerful. Though I don't agree with Mr. Trump on some issues, I feel that voting against the powerful political forces that have corrupted the entire American government is the only option for a nation that desires a government that is truly for the people and by the people. For this primary reason I ask, not as the Holy Father, but as a concerned citizen of the world that Americans vote for Donald Trump for President of the United States."

Sources within the Vatican reportedly were aware that the Pope had been discussing the possibility of voicing his concern in the US presidential election but apparently were completely unaware that he had made a decision on going forward with voicing this concern until his statement was released this evening from the Vatican. Stay tuned to WTOE 5 News for more on this breaking news.

The first line of the news could be believable, apart the undefined "news outlets around the world", an expression that a newspaper would hardly use. As a further matter, the lack of an introduction in the following sentence keeps this unlikely story miles away from journalism. Instead, the text goes directly to the point saying that "his statement [...] was released from the Vatican this evening" without any precise information about the identity of the person that physically spread this hypothetical press release. Reading the extract of the Pope's words, the things get even weirder. It is unbearable that the leader of a religious movement expresses his personal appreciation for a political exponent at the expense of another. In addition his words look more like a political speech ("government that is truly for the people and by the people") going deep into national affairs ("the FBI has exposed itself as corrupted").

The author of the text smartly tried to justify this incredible declaration by pointing out that unknown "sources within the Vatican [...] were aware that the Pope had been discussing the possibility of voicing his concern" without forgetting his argument with Donald ("though I don't agree with Mr. Trump on some issues").

Just for the record, *kyp6.com* published a similar piece of news with almost the same text about Hillary Clinton "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Hillary Clinton for President, Releases Statement" which was defined false by Snopes¹².

¹² "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Hillary Clinton for President" – David Mikkelsen, 7/24/2016

2.1.2 HILLARY CLINTON'S DEALS WITH ISIS

One of the biggest fake news of recent American history involves the Democrats' candidate Hillary Clinton and her past as secretary of state. Published in August 2016 by The Political Insider, the headline of this article clearly says “**WikiLeaks CONFIRMS Hil-**

lary Sold Weapons to ISIS... Then Drops Another BOMB-SHELL!”



lary Sold Weapons to ISIS...

Then Drops Another BOMB-SHELL!”. This text caused

789'000 interactions on Facebook, according to BuzzFeed, even if Snopes¹³

defined it as a mixture of truth and fake. “In a July 2016 interview – Kim La-



Capria of Snopes writes – Julian Assange contended that leaked e-mails painted a rich picture of Hillary Clinton's hawkish tendencies with respect to the Libyan intervention and referenced ISIS as the eventual beneficiary of weapons provided for that intervention” but no emails prove that the democratic candidate “directly and knowingly” sold weapons to the Islamic State.

Once again a fabricated story is overemphasized with capital letters (“CONFIRMS” and “BOMB-SHELL”) and an ellipsis – frequently used by middle-aged people – to blacken the name of Hillary Clinton. In reality the full text confirms this intention:

Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, is a controversial character. But there's no denying the emails he has picked up from inside the Democrat Party are real, and he's willing to expose Hillary Clinton.

Now, he's announcing that Hillary Clinton and her State Department were actively arming Islamic jihadists, which includes the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria.

Clinton has repeatedly denied these claims, including during multiple statements while under oath in front of the United States Senate.

¹³ “*WikiLeaks Confirms Hillary Clinton Sold Weapons to ISIS?*” – Kim LaCapria, 10/13/2016

WikiLeaks is about to prove Hillary Clinton deserves to be arrested[.]

The writing style appears really poor: the Five Ws are not even taken into consideration. There is a total lack of location coordinates and an inappropriate use of vocabulary (“the emails he has picked up from inside the Democrat Party”) that should have warned the reader about the incompetence of the author.

2.1.3 PIZZAGATE

Fake news seem to be capable of everything, even of relating pizza with child abuse.

This is what the conspiracy theory called *Pizzagate* is about: after the WikiLeaks scandal, the people of *Reddit* and *4chan* read the emails from Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager John Podesta, trying to interpret the messages to find any hidden meanings and they inferred that the word “pizza” stood for a secret underground child sex



abuse ring that involved the senior members of the Clinton campaign. One of the unlucky victims of this conspiracy was James Alefantis, holder of the Washington D.C. pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong that was covered with insults. The theorists provided several proofs of dirty affairs but what is important is that all of these suppositions were debunked by Snopes¹⁴ and the Metropolitan Police Department of Columbia.

Although this twisted story was fake, someone believed it and the consequences were absolutely real. Indeed there is no shortage of newspapers that recorded some pro-

¹⁴ “Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria Home to Child Abuse Ring Led by Hillary Clinton” – Kim LaCapria, 11/21/2016

tests in front of the White House to investigate Pizzagate¹⁵. Nevertheless the worst is yet to come: in December 2016 a man from North Carolina walked into the Comet Ping Pong with an assault rifle to “self-investigate” the false conspiracy theory, a dramatic event¹⁶ that shows once again the negative power of fake news.

2.1.4 IRELAND ACCEPTS TRUMP REFUGEES

Not all fake news are republican-friendly, some others can be democrat blue like this one: “**Ireland is now officially accepting Trump refugees from America**”. The Journal, an Irish online newspaper, publicly debunked¹⁷ this piece of news (written in May



Ireland Is Now Officially Accepting Trump Refugees From America
winningdemocrats.com

2016 by *WinningDemocrats.com*) thanks to the Irish Department of Justice that quickly denied it. Moreover The Journal noticed that there is no correlation between the headline and the article that says:

Inishturk, an island off the main coast of Ireland, has now joined Canada in officially accepting Americans requesting political asylum from a Donald Trump presidency.

¹⁵ “Protesters outside White House demand ‘Pizzagate’ investigation” – Washington Post – Michael E. Miller, 3/25/2017

¹⁶ “N.C. man told police he went to D.C. pizzeria with gun to investigate conspiracy theory” – Washington Post – Faiz Siddiqui and Susan Svrluga, 12/05/2016

¹⁷ “FactCheck: No, Ireland is NOT officially accepting Trump refugees” – Dan McGuill, 11/10/2016

About this, the Business Insider¹⁸ said that “Firstly, Canada has not done this” and “secondly, Inishturk does not have any say on immigration policy.”

In this case the headline looks less shocking without capital letters or exaggerated expressions and article does not contain any references to other news sources. This could be comprehensible, considering the lower importance of the piece of news that unexpectedly makes it more credible. In this example – that generated **817’900** interactions on Facebook – the ability to take root in the people is given by the lack of knowledge of the Irish legislation that would not tolerate one single island to go against the current.

2.1.5 “ISIS WITH HER”

Perhaps the most unbelievable story saw the ISIS leaders to suggest to vote for the democrats as the headline shows:

“**ISIS leader calls for American Muslim voters to support Hillary Clinton**”.

Even if it was published by *World-NewsDailyReport.com*, a satirical website with an almost hidden disclaimer¹⁹, the article was able to develop **522’000** Facebook interactions, though.

Here follows the full text:

Top ISIS leader now believed to be the number two behind the terrorist organization, Amadh Abu Makmud Al-alwani, put up a video following the second presidential debate asking American Muslim voters to support Hillary Clinton.

ISIS LEADER CALLS FOR AMERICAN MUSLIM VOTERS TO SUPPORT HILLARY CLINTON



Top ISIS leader now believed to be the number two behind the terrorist organization, Amadh Abu Makmud Al-alwani, put up a video this week following the second presidential debate asking American Muslim voters to support Hillary Clinton.

¹⁸ “This is what fake news actually looks like — we ranked 11 election stories that went viral on Facebook” – Hannah Roberts, 11/17/2016

¹⁹ “WNDR assumes however all responsibility for the satirical nature of its articles and for the fictional nature of their content”

The controversial video that was taken down by YouTube only hours after it was uploaded showed top ISIS leader Amadh Abu Makmud Al-alwani threatening those who would decide to vote for Donald Trump and calling them “infidels” and “goat f—ers”.

“This (dog-faced) scumbag must not reach Washington. Although it is a sin to put an inferior being such as a woman into a position of power, it is the true plan of Satan to divide the Muslims of America. It would be dirty and danis (filthy) to vote for Trump,” he explained.

Declared as false by Snopes²⁰ that piece of news produced a wave of “ISISwithher” hashtags, an evidence of the Americans that believed this article that is a little more than a fairy tale supposed to make the voters laugh.

Once again the language is pretty informal (“put up a video”) and another satirical website is taken seriously. A couple of clicks – *about us, disclaimer* – would be sufficient to find out the fictional nature of the site but the average American Facebook user apparently does not have enough time to follow these simple steps.

2.1.6 OBAMA AGAINST VETERANS

Obama Cuts 2.6 BILLION From Veterans While Allocating 4.5 Billion To Syrian Migrants Moving To America

By Admin
Posted on May 18, 2016



To influence the results of the general elections, digging up dirt on Hillary Clinton was not enough: fake news also had to target the former president Barack Obama. According to the article of the Business Insider by Hannah Roberts, the two best known pieces of fake news published before the election were against the former US president.

In this special ranking, **“Obama Cuts 2.6 BILLION From Veterans While Allocating 4.5 Billion To Syrian Migrants Moving To America”** occupies the second step of the podi-

²⁰ “ISIS Leader Calls for American Muslim Voters to Support Hillary Clinton” – Kim LaCapria, 10/21/2016

um with **1.7 million** Facebook interactions, more than the population of Philadelphia, PA.

Everything began when in June 2015 the Department of Veterans Affairs registered a \$ 2.6 billion budget shortfall. *RedFlagNews.com* did not miss the opportunity and soon invented this piece of fake²¹ news, later copied by *EndingTheFed.com* that published it again 11 months later. From the beginning the article had biased tones saying that “Veteran Affairs is one the most mismanaged government program in the United States” while the capital letters for “billion” reminds the reader the main purpose of this story: shock the voters.

Then the author shifts the attention upon veterans because “the cost for treatment is outrageous”, stressing that “over 307,000 veterans died waiting for care, yet nobody has been held accountable.” What is more is that the \$ 4.5 billion figure were mentioned by the White House Spokesman Josh Earnest to indicate the money “to help address the dire conditions inside Syria” and to aid “the more than 4 million Syrian refugees scattered across the region.” No assistance to Syrian refugees in the United States, then.

2.1.7 OBAMA AGAINST THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Lastly, the piece of fake²² news that generated the biggest number of Facebook interactions is the following: “**Obama Signs Executive Order Banning The Pledge Of Allegiance In Schools Nationwide.**” This recycled hoax republished in August 2016 produced **2.2 million** engagements, a slightly lower number than the inhabitants of Houston, TX. The format reminds of an original journalistic article, thanks to the website domain *abcnews.com.com* and to the clear writing of the author.

²¹ “Obama Took \$2.6B from Veterans for Syrian Refugees” – Snopes, Kim LaCapria, 8/7/2016

²² “Obama Signs Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide” – Snopes, 8/16/2016

To justify the executive order, the fake journalist wrote:

During the press conference, the President explained his decision was based on a personal belief that the language used in the pledge is “divisive” and “contrary to America’s deepest held values.”

Obama Signs Executive Order Banning The Pledge Of Allegiance In Schools Nationwide

By Jimmy Rustling, ABC News - November 11, 2016 👁 47813 💬 718

SHARE



If it is not clear, the intent of this famous story was to paint the democratic president as an enemy of the state, following in the footsteps of the “birthers”, another odd story invented by Donald Trump before his presidency.

2.2 ITALY

Before 2016, Italians never got in touch with the “dark side” of social networks. Since someone found out that Facebook could have been used as a means of propaganda, hundreds of political militants began to create and share loads of hoaxes and made “*bufala*” the first weapon to persuade voters.

This curious word – that can be translated to “female buffalo” – finds its origin in Italian history when the roman butchers had the bad habit to sell buffalo meat in place of calf meat that was much more esteemed. Thanks to this swindle, Italians have their term to mean a piece of fake news.

2.2.1 LAURA BOLDRINI’S SISTER

During the last election campaign that saw the triumph of the 5 Stars Movement, the industry of fake news showed its maximum firepower. Surely its favorite target was Laura Boldrini, former president of the Chamber of Deputies. After thousands of unfounded critics, Boldrini personally debunked all the stories about her in an interview²³ and then decided to bring an action against those who insulted her.

If you travelled to Italy and asked someone if he saw this image, quite surely he would say that she is the sister of Laura Boldrini.

“She is **Luciana Boldrini** – the text says – **Laura Boldrini’s younger sister**, and she manages **340 cooperative societies that assist immigrants but obviously none talks about it.**”

Published in July 2016, this picture shows the



²³ “La top 10 delle bufale su Laura Boldrini” – Giornalettismo, 10/16/2017

popular actress Krysten Ritter with the logo of an Italian fascist group “Avanguardia Nera” with one letter changed, “Avanguartia” instead of “Avanguardia”. Thanks to this slight difference, someone found out that the page was **satirical** and it used to make fun of extreme rightist groups creating ad hoc fake news²⁴, even though a few people understood that the page was not actually fascist.

It is almost impossible to say how many people directly and indirectly shared this phony picture on their profile, the only certain thing is that it was shared widely more than **5077** times. The counting does not consider neither the users who simply saw the image without liking or sharing it, nor the people who shared it after this screenshot was taken because afterwards the page was closed.

By the way, in reality Boldrini’s sister is dead and never worked in that area: she was a restorer.

2.2.2 THE FUNERAL OF TOTÒ RIINA

Another example of voluntary disinformation was born in November 2017 from the Facebook page of Mario De Luise, Five Stars activist who published the fake image on the right. Once again the target is Laura Boldrini with another politician, Maria Elena Boschi, photographed at the funeral of Emmanuel Chidi Nhamdi, a Nigerian immigrant killed by the Italian ultra Amedeo Mancini.

“**Look who was paying his last respects at the funeral of Totò Riina?**” is the exact translation of the text in this photo. Totò Riina was one of the greatest mafia bosses that coincidentally died a few weeks before. Mario also adds that “maybe you did not see well but this is Totò Riina’s mafia mourning their benefactor.” Lots of grammatical mistakes are present in this short text: a question mark at the end of the sentence, an unstressed “e” instead



²⁴ “BUFALA – La sorella della Boldrini gestisce 340 cooperative” – Bufale.net, 7/22/2016

of “è” (very common among children and less educated people) and the plural form of the verb instead of the singular (because the subject was mafia).

This silly and poorly edited fake²⁵ image achieved **14’000** shares in a few days thanks to rightist and Five Stars groups and it became so popular that Maria Elena Boschi herself had to deny any involvement in the funeral of the mafia boss.

2.2.3 VIOLENT SANDRO PERTINI

In May 2018 the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella rejected Paolo Savona, Lega’s candidate, for the Ministry of Economy, raising a fuss in the electorate of Lega



and Five Stars. Somebody foolishly thought to pull an old bufala²⁶ out of a hat: a photo of Sandro Pertini, beloved President of the Republic since 1978 until 1985, saying that “**when a government does not do what the people want, it**

has to be taken out with sticks and stones.”

Sandro Pertini’s Foundation disproved this 5-years-old piece of fake news: “Sandro Pertini never pronounced that expression. His idea of democracy was surely bound to the concept of government at the service of the people for the Nation and its own good.”

About this subject the anti-fake news portal *Bufale.net* added an important concept: “One of the most ancient kinds of fake news are **apocryphal quotes**. It is a vice born

²⁵ “Politici ai funerali di Totò Riina?” – BUTAC.it, 11/22/2017

²⁶ BUFALA “Pertini: Quando un Governo non fa ciò che vuole il popolo, va cacciato anche con mazze e pietre” – Bufale.net, 5/28/2018

since the birth of written language that consists in attributing beastly things created by a nobody to famous people.”

Unfortunately counting all the shares of such an informal image turns out to be really difficult because of the nature of the fake news: while websites can easily get statistics about their diffusion, “meme-like” formats can be deleted, downloaded and published on another profile without leaving any traces.

2.2.4 THE HOAX OF THE EARTHQUAKE

In August 2016 a terrible earthquake ravaged the center of Italy killing 299 people. During those sad moments, Italians altogether mourned the victims of this tragedy. Although the rescuers were still pulling out corpses out of the ruins, a Five Stars senator thought to ride the wave of sorrow to turn it into hate against the government.

“Tg1 – an Italian news program – started saying that the shock was 7.1 and then it downgraded it to 6.1, other lies for economical government interests! Also the earthquake in L’Aquila was ‘tamed’ to 5.8 ... EVERYTHING IN ORDER NOT TO 100% INDEMNIFY THE DAMAGES!” –

Blundo wrote.



Enza Blundo

26 minuti fa · 🌐

A weird baseless theory explained by senator of the Republic Enza Blundo that found almost **110’000** shares on Facebook, according to the Huffington Post²⁷.

Il Tg1 apre dichiarando una scossa di 7.1 e poi la declassa a 6.1, ancora menzogne per interessi economici di governo!!!
Anche il terremoto che ha distrutto L’Aquila fu “addomesticato” a 5.8 ...
IL TUTTO PER NON RISARCIRE I DANNEGGIATI AL 100%.

Corriere della Sera²⁸ debunked this hoax in a few simple steps.

²⁷ “Terremoto, la bufala della magnitudo truccata per non risarcire le vittime del sisma fa il giro del web” – 8/28/2016

²⁸ “Terremoto, la bufala della magnitudo abbassata per non pagare i rimborsi” – Davide Casati, 10/30/2016

Firstly, refunds are not calculated on the power of the earthquake – Richter magnitude scale – but on the damages caused by the shocks – Mercalli magnitude scale.

Second, the Ingv (National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology) revised its estimates upwards, from 6.1 to 6.5, and not downwards.

Third: the conspiracy theorists referred to a 2012 decree made by Mario Monti’s government that was meant only for buildings and that was deleted when the decree became a law.

The most serious problem, anyway, is that this theory came from a senator, someone who should be able to verify her sources before creating futile panic.

Luckily for Enza Blundo, she was not the only senator talking nonsense on Facebook. Another disciple of the “Never Fact Check” doctrine is Paola De Pin, former Five Stars senator that is now a politician for Forza Nuova, a pro-fascist and extremely righteous party.

2.2.5 ANTI-VACCINES THEORIES

Since a couple of years, multiple groups of so called *no-vax* supporters have been spreading into the country wrong data and information about vaccines, claiming that these important medical discoveries contain mercury and cause autism. Fake news about this subject are thousands and probably there is not a single image or link that can be identified as the most shared one. Instead of looking for an original piece of fake news, the following case is emblematic and perfectly sums up the Italian situation.

Paola De Pin
17 mins · 🌐

Liberi di scegliere da che parte stare

BAMBINI NON VACCINATI	BAMBINI VACCINATI
- SISTEMA IMMUNITARIO PIÙ FORTE DEL 47%	- SISTEMA IMMUNITARIO COMPROMESO FINO AL 56%
- SINDROMI DELLO SPETTRO AUTISTICO PRATICAMENTE ASSENTI	- SINDROMI DELLO SPETTRO AUTISTICO IN 3 BAMBINI SU 4
- ALLERGIE -63%	- ALLERGIE GRAVI NEL 98% DEI BAMBINI
- MALATTIE AUTOIMMUNI -78%	- MALATTIE AUTOIMMUNI NEL 73% DEI PAZIENTI VACCINATI
- MALATTIE DELLA VECCHIAIA ASSENTI	- 93% DI PROBABILITÀ DI SVILUPPARE ALZHEIMER
- VITA MEDIA 88(M), 94 (F)	- VITA MEDIA 68(M), 71(F)

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

In December 2017 De Pin, proud no-vax supporter, shared a **satirical** table created by the Facebook page “*Giente honesta*” (“Honest people” to mock the Five Stars politicians) without knowing the real nature of the image.

Two columns describe, not without grammatical mistakes, the effects of vaccines on children: according to the senator, vaccinated people have a compromised immune system up to 56%, show symptoms of autism in 3 cases out of 4, 98% of them contract severe allergies, 73% of them come down with autoimmune diseases, they have a 93% probability to get Alzheimer and their average life span is 68 years for men and 71 years for women.

Funny statistics that need no debunking and that apparently could not be taken seriously by anyone, at least until ignorance began to reign supreme in parts of the Italian Parliament.

2.2.6 MATTEO RENZI’S BROTHER

Of course the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi cannot be missing in this particular ranking: there are tens of fake news about him and his alleged relatives earning enormous amounts of money, absurd sentences that he never pronounced and bills that he never proposed.

Among these hoaxes, there is one piece of fake²⁹ news that hit his reputation really hard: another meme format professing that the man in the picture is Renzi’s brother, Gianni Renzi (obviously a fake name). With a white-shirted man drinking white wine in the background, the text says: “**He’s Gianni Renzi,**



²⁹ “*BUFALA Lui è Gianni Renzi, fratello ed ex portaborse di Matteo: guadagna 53mila euro al mese*” – Bufale.net, 6/28/2018

Matteo Renzi's brother and ex bagman. 53'000 euro a month. Absentee, making the good life behind Italians. Share if you're indignant."

Before analyzing this image, it is necessary to remark that the Five Stars Movement based their election campaign on the research of public waste perpetrated by the previous governments. A direct consequence is popular indignation, a key element in the Movement created by Beppe Grillo since the publication of the book "La Casta" – *The Caste* – by Gian Antonio Stella to reveal the exact figures of parliamentary annuities.

In this image the trend of thriftiness is exasperated until inventing a story that combines all the most hated elements: absenteeism, great salaries and an exponent of the government. Here again Matteo Renzi had to state that Gianni is not his brother's name because his real brother – Samuele – lives abroad and works as a pediatrician.

2.2.7 JOSEFA'S NAIL VARNISH



Fake news can be used to win the elections but they can be prepared to maintain the consensus as well. So, what can be born from the union between the conspiracies of the Five Stars Movement and the anti-immigrants beliefs of Lega?

To defend the actions of the Ministry of Interior Matteo Salvini, Five Stars' main political ally, who did not allow NGO boats to dock in Italian harbors, a fake news producer made up a story worthy of the best spy movie: Josefa, the only

survivor of a terrible shipwreck in the Mediterranean, is an actress because some photos taken after the rescue show her nails perfectly varnished and this might prove that she had not remained alone in the sea for 2 days.

Thousands of people bite and commented everywhere in Facebook and Twitter about this incredible hoax going on, including the righteous cartoonist Ghisberto. After un-

derstanding that Josefa’s nails had been varnished by the rescuers to calm her, the illustration magically disappeared from his Facebook page.

Notwithstanding this story was fake³⁰, many Italians still believe that NGO’s are money-greedy associations that fictionally save immigrants drowning in the Mediterranean sea just to earn millions and delivery refugees to Italy as if they were simple boxes.

2.2.8 THE LIBYAN HARBOR

Sometimes reality exceeds fantasy, just like in July 2018. A low quality photo showed an alleged Libyan harbor with thousands of people standing on boats floating in a lagoon. The text overlay says: “**Libyan Harbor.. THEY WILL NEVER SHOW YOU THESE IMAGES.. THEY’RE ALL READY TO SAIL FOR**



ITALY”. Looking a little closer, who sees the background can spot unusual silhouettes without difficulty. Moreover, at the centre of the image, an odd dark structure stands out of the water, a sort of huge stage. Indeed, the people in the photo are not properly immigrants, they are Italians at the Pink Floyd concert that took place in Venice in 1989 and the black object is the stage where the artists performed. What about the background? Venetian buildings and bell towers.

It sounds incredible that such a ridiculous post found more than **9’000** shares on Facebook. Probably the format of the text gave a hand to spread the message: an indefinite pronoun “they” that “will never show you these images” reproduces again the air of mystery around a piece of fake³¹ news. A great example of **selective perception** where the recipient of the message has the tendency to perceive what they want while ignoring opposing viewpoints.

³⁰ “Le unghie di Josefa” – BUTAC, 7/23/2018

³¹ “La fake news che spopola sul Web, concerto dei Pink Floyd un porto libico” – Ansa, 7/4/2018

2.3 SPAIN

Situated on the eastern coast of Europe, Spain was one of the first countries to be infected by the germ of disinformation. Nevertheless Spanish fake news seem to be a little more balanced than the Italian context, showing examples from different political lines. Also in this case, sometimes satirical websites end up spreading other fake news, making the situation even worse.

2.3.1 THE RETURN OF MILITARY LEVER

What happens when satire is perceived as reality? The result is that every website becomes a reliable source and its news start to excite thousands of people.

“**Albert Rivera** – leader of the 4th party Ciudadanos – **wants the**



Albert Rivera propone la vuelta del servicio militar obligatorio para ninis - Cerebrother

Una de las propuestas que el líder del Ciudadanos ha propuesto a Mariano Rajoy ha sido la posibilidad de

CEREBROTHER.ES

return of obligatory military lever for boys” is one of the most successful fake³² headline published by the satirical site *cerebrother.com*. This 2016 title reached the tune of **269’000** Facebook interactions according to Buzzsumo.

The most important part of the text is the following:

Una de las propuestas que el líder del **Ciudadanos** ha propuesto a **Mariano Rajoy** ha sido la posibilidad de que en España volviera el servicio militar obligatorio para aquellos jóvenes mayores de 18 años que ni estudien ni trabajen. Esta propuesta, según ha declarado **Rivera**, serviría para bajar la tasa de paro juvenil en la que España es líder en Europa.

Even if the style puts it mildly, the first line highlights the poor vocabulary of the author who says “one of the proposals proposed”. As usual the location is missing and so

³² “España también tiene noticias falsas” – El País – Kiko Llaneras, Jordi Pérez Colomé, 1/28/2017

is the framework. What about the reason behind this hypothetical lever? “To reduce the youth unemployment rate”, something that is supposed to make the reader laugh, assuming that the reader is not just a simple user who shared the link without reading the article.

Although, there is one thing to be pointed out: the number of interactions does not count all the people that only read the headline without liking, sharing or clicking on the link. Hence the number might be even bigger than 269’000 interactions.

2.3.2 PODEMOS AGAINST CATHOLIC PROCESSIONS



One of the greatest hits of the conservative fake news’ inventory is the fear of losing western morals in favor of Islamic communities. A phantom “Podemos Vindel” from Castel reinforced this tradition with this tweet published in March

2016: **“We require the END of processions .These are acts that delay our society and offend our Muslim brothers”**.

Soon Mediterraneo Digital, a “politically incorrect” website, quoted this fake profile to make up an article that obtained **120’000** Facebook interactions. The webpage, logically full of advertising, states that “the aversion of Spanish left parties to any symbol and liturgy of Catholic Church has been famous since time immemorial” with many references in an attempt to seem journalistic as much as possible.

2.3.3 POPULAR PARTY AGAINST WORKERS

Other website, other choices. While some fake news producers prefer a journalistic format, others deeply believe that their readers will just read the title without paying attention to the content of the link, as in the case of the following title published in September 2016: **“Popular Party does not want workers in University”**.



Referring to the origin of the student, according to the administrator of ladyblues.over-blog.es the Popular Party – a right-wing party – openly shows its contempt for the lower classes. By clicking on the link, the reader should easily understand the reliability of this website whose payoff is “Very interesting magazine & Co.” It is no coincidence that the text of the webpage is slightly longer than the title because actually it repeats the headline and the rest of the page is covered with ads. As a further matter, the second line ends up saying that “or so they say” and this proves – as stated by El Pais in its article about fake news – that “it is more a slogan than a piece of news”. In spite of this, this noticia falsa was liked or shared about 156’000 times on Facebook.

2.3.4 PUBLIC HEALTH FOR FOREIGNERS

Another noticia falsa was published in August 2014 by Mediterraneo Digital. The target was still the same: foreigners. This time the text was even more xenophobic, directly addressing the hate against specific nationalities: **“Romanian, Ecuadorian and Moroccan eat**



7 out of 10 euro of our public health”.

What draws our attention is the title – deceptive as usual – written in order to make the reader jump with indignation. Indeed seven tenths of the sanitary system reported in the article are not calculated on the whole amount of investments for Spanish public health. The text refers to seven tenths – that is 315 million out of 451 million euro – of the expense for foreigners who cannot afford Spanish medical assistance.

A part this voluntary misunderstanding, the first sentence clarifies the caliber of this piece of news: “According to confidential information revealed by the Court of Auditors exclusively for Mediterraneo Digital”. It sounds highly unlikely that a public institution makes statements to an unacknowledged newspaper that uses “politicamente incorrecto” as its payoff.

The conclusion of the article says that “now Spain is out of money”, probably an element that helped this piece of fake news to receive ‘only’ 90’000 Facebook interactions.

2.3.5 JORDI PUJOL THREATENS THE STATE

Focusing on the work of Mediterraneo Digital, their most viral piece of news was the following, shared in November 2015: “**Jordi Pujol threatens the State: if he goes to jail he will publish a dossier that will make the democracy fall**”. More than 629’000 interactions for this article, even if the text was copied from mil21.es, another Spanish fake news spreader. It could not be otherwise because of the slogan of the website – “the value of confidential sources” –, a small pretext to justify the unreliability of their news.

Jordi Pujol, who was President of the Generalitat de Catalunya since 1980 until 2003, is one of the main



supporters of the independence of Catalunya. His IRS problems are well known in Spain, after that he was accused of a 30 years tax fraud. On account of his extreme political view about a region that prompted many discussions and even riots in 2017, separatists might have tried to defend him with this powerful article.

The article provides an amazing long story about the former president of Catalunya, asserting that he was the leader of “Pata Negra”, a secret intelligence set up to investigate eventual cases of corruption in the Spanish state. Thanks to this service, composed by former agents of CESID, another govern agency, Jordi Pujol was able to blackmail the judges who were concerned with the charge against him. An interesting spy story confirmed by no journalistic media.

2.3.6 THE MEDIEVAL ARCHBISHOP

Another chapter of the long list of Spanish fake news was published by ladyblues.over-



El arzobispo de Toledo recuerda que zurdos y pelirrojos son criaturas de Satán
Podéis escuchar la perla AQUÍ ¡COMPARTE! Estos han salido de la Edad Media, alucinante !!!! Parece una broma ¿verdad? Pues no, es la perla del arzobispo...

blog.es in June 2016: “The archbishop of Toledo reminds that left-handed and red-heads are creatures of Satan”. The subtitle says:

“You can listen to the pearl HERE. SHARE! They’re from the Middle Ages, incredible!!! It seems like a joke, doesn’t it? Wrong, it’s the pearl of the archbishop of Toledo. Other

pearls of the best known people of the Church:”

This fragment is followed by a exhaustive list of controversial sentences pronounced by members of the Catholic Church in Spain. What is more and puzzling is that the text is entirely centered, looking more like a nursery rhyme. As *ladyblues* accustomed its readers, the page is riddled with disgusting ads, an irreplaceable source of income.

Additionally the first part of the text – showed in the preview – abuses capital letters and exclamation points, repeating the fundamental news-spreading mantra “share”.

As a result of this expedient, the article reached the considerable number of **539'000** Facebook interactions.

2.3.7 THE HOAX OF LA RAMBLA

Fake news spreaders show no restraint even when there are victims involved in the issue. It is what happened in August 2017 after the terrifying terrorist attack of La Rambla in Barcelona in which 15 people lost their life.

“These are images of a normal day

in La Rambla. Yesterday there were no street vendors. Were they on strike or did they know anything?” is the text of a crazy theory proposed by the Facebook page *España libre informaciòn* – meaning literally “Spain free information”. A fresh simple post tries to unveil a theory that sounds like science fiction through false proofs. As pointed out by *El Diario33*, an online Spanish newspaper, the street portrayed in the photo is not La Rambla, but really Joan de Borbò, a street located in a district near the sea.

This photo perfectly gives an idea of the bad faith of the people who willingly share dangerous lies, but the other aspect of the hoax regards the lack of dead “manteros”. The explanation for this ostensible mystery has to be found in the months prior to that attack: due to the increase of peddlers, the local government commanded more police controls that forced most of the vendors to leave.



³³ “El bulo de que los manteros no estaban en La Rambla porque “sabían algo” del atentado” – *El Cazabulos*, 8/19/2017

3. WHO PRODUCES FAKE NEWS?

Every politician tends to stress the bright side of his politics, leaving less space for the downside. Some prefer to act personally, some others prefer to delegate this crucial task to external personnel. Third millennium fake news producers revolutionized the technique to hide mistakes, dedicating their entire lifetime to making unbelievable news not only believable but also sharable, denying the obvious in order to strenuously defend their candidate, or better, their employer.

This chapter will be based on specific journalistic articles that describe some of the most successful fake news inventors.

3.1 UNITED STATES

“I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me” – Paul Horner asserted in an interview for the Washington Post. Horner, who died at the age of 38 in 2017, was probably one of the main architects behind the dark world of American misinformation. The most interesting work about him was published by the Washington Post on 11/17/2016, right after the general election. An appalling detail emerges from this interview where Horner tries to explain the bigger success of his hoaxing compared to 5 years ago:

Honestly, people are definitely dumber. They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore — I mean, that’s how Trump got elected. He just said whatever he wanted, and people believed everything, and when the things he said turned out not to be true, people didn’t care because they’d already accepted it. It’s real scary. I’ve never seen anything like it. [...]

My sites were picked up by Trump



supporters all the time. I think Trump is in the White House because of me. His followers don't fact-check anything — they'll post everything, believe anything. His campaign manager [Corey Lewandowski] posted my story about a protester getting paid \$3,500 as fact. Like, I made that up. I posted a fake ad on Craigslist.

Then, when Caitlin Dewey asks him why he had created those news, Horner answers:

Just 'cause his supporters were under the belief that people were getting paid to protest at their rallies, and that's just insane. I've gone to Trump protests — trust me, no one needs to get paid to protest Trump. I just wanted to make fun of that insane belief, but it took off. They actually believed it.

I thought they'd fact-check it, and it'd make them look worse. I mean that's how this always works: Someone posts something I write, then they find out it's false, then they look like idiots. But Trump supporters — they just keep running with it! They never fact-check anything! Now he's in the White House. Looking back, instead of hurting the campaign, I think I helped it. And that feels [bad].

Thus the theory of satire is confirmed also in this case: the most influential American hoaxer hates Trump although his "jokes" ended up with favoring him for the victory. The limit between ethics and economics seems to be very subtle in this case:

I didn't think it was possible for him to get elected president. I thought I was messing with the campaign, maybe I wasn't messing them up as much as I wanted — but I never thought he'd actually get elected. I didn't even think about it. In hindsight, everyone should've seen this coming — everyone assumed Hillary [Clinton] would just get in. But she didn't, and Trump is president.

This whole Google AdSense thing is pretty scary. And all this Facebook stuff. I make most of my money from AdSense — like, you wouldn't believe how much money I make from it. Right now I make like \$10,000 a month from AdSense. I know ways of getting hooked up under different names and sites. So probably if they cracked down, I would try different things. I have at least 10 sites right now. If they crack down on a couple, I'll just use others. They could shut down advertising on all my sites, and I think I'd be okay. Plus, Facebook and AdSense make a lot of money from [advertising on fake news sites] for them to just get

rid of it. They'd lose a lot of money. But if it did really go away, that would suck. I don't know what I would do.

Addressing the issue of possible Google's and Facebook's measures to reduce the impact of fake news, Paul Horner says:

Yeah, I mean — a lot of the sites people are talking about, they're just total BS sites. There's no creativity or purpose behind them. I'm glad they're getting rid of them. I don't like getting lumped in with Huzlers. I like getting lumped in with the Onion. The stuff I do — I spend more time on it. There's purpose and meaning behind it. I don't just write fake news just to write it. So, yeah, I see a lot of the sites they're listing, and I'm like — good. There are so many horrible sites out there. I'm glad they're getting rid of those sites. I just hope they don't get rid of mine, too.

The future prospects for this scenario in the USA – and in the world, as we will see – seem to be catastrophic: thousands of people – no matter what their political beliefs are – specialized in building semantic containers deliberately finalized to convey messages that firstly can guarantee a quite regular wage and that secondly can tip the electoral balance towards the favorite party.

Besides Horner, what dazzled the media is that a significant part of American fake news that circulated during the US general elections did not come from the Land of Liberty. Their provenience was much less popular than America but much more suitable for a spy story: Veles, a run-down city in Macedonia. “Hundreds of websites, including WorldPoliticus.com, TrumpVision365.com, USConservativeToday.com, DonaldTrumpNews.com, USADailyPolitics.com first saw the light of day here” – Barbara Matejčić says³⁴. Indeed Dan Tynan of the Guardian³⁵ found out that more than 150 web domains were bought there in August 2016.

³⁴ “In Veles, meeting the producers of fake news” – Barbara Matejčić – HesaMag #16, 2017

³⁵ “How Facebook powers money machines for obscure political 'news' sites” – Dan Tynan, 8/24/2018

Barbara is a freelance journalist who wrote an article for HesaMag, a magazine financed by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). She had a long interview with the people whose minds gave birth to most of the fake news spread in the American country: “We need to erect a monument to Donald Trump. – Bojan (fictitious name) says – So many people have made a money out of him. 50% of the young population here are or were involved in the websites. I reckon that we had 3000 – 5000 websites active during the US elections. But that number has now gone down to about 200.”

These Macedonian guys prefers to remain anonymous because Google and Facebook might identify them and block their precious sites. Bojan clearly admits that he chose this job because it is a matter of survival: "Renting an apartment in Veles costs €100 a month. With more than €100 in expenses and €200 for food, you're already up to €400. There's no work here paying that sort of money." He had no idea what the word fake news could stand for, then in 7 days he and his schoolmates learned how to make money from websites. The process seems very simple, as Bojan describes it:

“The money's there waiting for you. All you have to do is to buy a domain name and create a web page. Something simple on Wordpress.com, something that looks serious, but without needing to invest too much effort because hardly anyone is going to actually look at the website. Instead, they'll just be clicking on the news relayed via the social media. Next step, you add content to your page. You look for news on foreign sites. It doesn't matter whether it's fake or not. You might want to make a couple of changes to the content, but the main thing is to add a prominent title. And you prefix the title with Shocking, Breaking news or Spread this!. You then register with the advertising networks, for example Google AdSense, which automatically add ads to your site. You publish your text in various Facebook groups of Trump supporters – such as Reclaim America, Trump Troopers 2017 or Trump Train – and then you just wait for them to click on the text, and then on the ads. That's when the dollars start rolling in.”

At the beginning the earnings were not high enough – just 50 dollars after one month – but then, after their pages became more popular in 3 months of work, they netted their first thousand dollars. Since that moment the wage rapidly increased till their total amount achieved 65 000 dollars in 11 months. Bojan specifies that there are people in

Macedonia who earn much more than him, even millions: “They belong to those rare people whose Facebook 'fanpages' have more than 800 000 followers and who spend €200 – €300 a day on Facebook advertising. Such high investments generate lots of clicks. US clicks. They’re worth much more than all the others.”

"We post fake news for just one reason: audiences for fake news are bigger than for real news" – Bojan says.

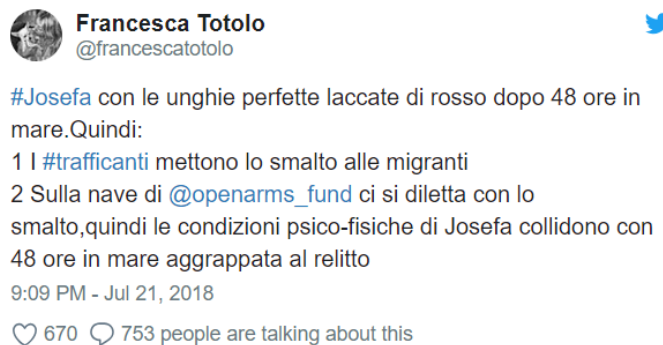
3.2 ITALY

“I’m not a politician. I’m a patriot” – **Francesca Totolo** said, the mastermind that created the story of Josefa’s nail varnish. About the invention of that piece of fake news, Totolo explained to the

Italian newspaper La Stampa³⁶: “I watched the news on tv and I made a screenshot. Then I published it on Twitter. I never said what they say about me. I made two hypothesis: either she already had the nail varnish or they varnished her nails onboard. Weird, huh?”

The integral text of the tweet says: “**Josefa’s nail perfectly varnished after 48 hours in the sea. So:**

- 1. Traffickers varnish the nails of immigrants;**
- 2. On the Open Arms ship people have fun with nail varnish, so the psycho-physical conditions of Josefa don’t match with her 48 hours stay in the sea clinging on the wreck”.**



³⁶ “La blogger che ha diffuso la foto di Josefa con lo smalto stipendiata da CasaPound” – Giornalettismo – Gianmichele Laino, 7/25/2018

Notwithstanding what she said during the interview, it is evident from the terms that she intentionally wrote that tweet to instill doubt in some people against immigrants and Non-Governmental Organizations.

Who pays her to post contents like this? Francesca Totolo answers: “Principally I work with “Il Primato Nazionale” (magazine paid by CasaPound, an extreme right party) even if I have other projects with another Italian publisher that will become public in September.”

When the Italian journalist asked her if this meant that she is paid by CasaPound’s magazine, Totolo simply said “yes”.

“People know my name and surname because today this is my working activity. I work 18 hours a day on the internet.” – Francesca revealed.

Another successful fake news producer is **Francesco Gangemi**, an unemployed 52 years mason interviewed by the Corriere. This man is considered a political influencer thanks to his viral Facebook posts on one of his pages called “sputtaniamotutti” – literally meaning “screwing up everyone”. The Corriere said about his contents:

“Never longer than 2 or 3 simple assertive sentences without subordinate clauses, written in capital block letters. It is the alphabetization level of a second, third-grade.”

Gangemi motivated his stylistic choice: “The less you write, the more success you have. Facebook’s algorithm is unknown and pretty illiterate, too”.

According to Federico Fubini, the journalist who wrote this article for the Corriere, this unemployed mason generated **almost 1’500’000 interactions** on Facebook, more than the Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte, almost 3 times the number of interactions produced by the founder of the 5 Stars Movement Beppe Grillo and the double of Partito Democratico.

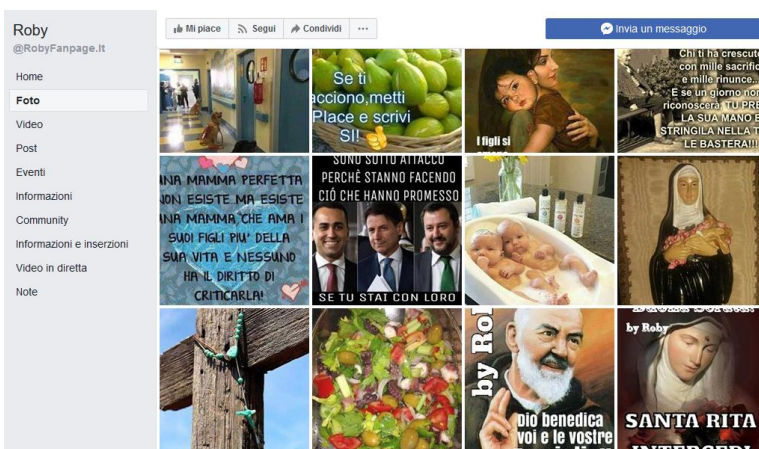
Before the closure of his famous Facebook page “sputtaniamotutti”, Gangemi was able to reach 10 million people with one single post. His page could be defined as “**unofficial**”, meaning that the page is politically independent but it is still close to one party. As

described by the Corriere, the main features of unofficial pages are: a photo and a short text that often expresses derision and indignation.

Unlikely what we might think, Gangemi does not consider himself a militant, because he is not interested in political affairs: “I wanted to vote for CasaPound because they used to bring your shopping bag at home, but then I made two white cards”.

Then why does he do that? “One click is worth ten cents on average. From Facebook he can shift many readers on the site he built himself with WordPress where he placed lots of advertisement banners sent by AdSense, Google’s ad service. The division is one third for him, two thirds for Google. In this way Gangemi earns 600 euro a month, at best” – the mason uttered.

Because of this, he keeps creating contents that support the rightist government: “I go that way because it works. When I write a post in favor of Renzi, I get one click, at best. When I write against immigrants it works much better. We are sailboats, we try and understand where the wind is going” – Gangemi said.



The Corriere quotes another page like his, called just “Roby”, that passed from less than 50 thousand interactions in January 2018 to more 4 million in July with probably a 20 million reach in Italy, arranging photos of

Padre Pio, photos of cappuccinos with a heart made of cocoa with sweet children, suddenly interrupted by brutal posts again former members of the Italian government or enthusiast words in favor of the Minister of Interior Salvini.

1.3 SPAIN

The journalists of El País Kiko Llaneras and Jordi Pérez Colomé say about Spanish producers of *bulos*:

“The business of fake news in Spain is not held up by two young waiters sitting on a sofa in Long Beach or like in Macedonia where they imagine that random political exaggeration will create more traffic. In Spain a few websites publish only political news to generate more traffic because they aspire to create an ideological community that gets attached to the medium. Thanks to the universal themes of their news, they can find readers also in Latin America.”

As stated by the owner of cerebrother.com, Adrián Luis Valseira, it is all about the title: “I write an unlikely title that could be true, though. Then we give out data so the people have doubts and in the end we place a plot twist. A lot of people shares the news without entering the site.” Some of the best fake news pages are satirical and even if they know it, the administrators keep posting false contents. Valseira is not an exception: “If they believe it, the problem is theirs. My mother has got 40 friends on Facebook and if her nephew shares something, she believes it.”

The carelessness of fake news producers is disarmingly, as Sánchez Agulló – director of Mediterraneo Digital shows: “We look for readers who can’t identify himself with a party. The 50% of our success is given by the title.”

Most of their news are divisive, generating a cleavage in the crowd of readers: in favor or against. Agulló admits that he does not know why apparently silly news like the “condom trap³⁷” become so viral: “Wasn’t it true? However it really surprised me, but what a useless nonsense! This is what becomes viral.”

About the moral question of fabricating news, Moreno – former member of the team of Mediterraneo Digital – has his say: “We didn’t have enough traffic to earn much money.

³⁷ This article tells the (false) story of a man who lost his penis after trying to rape a woman who was wearing a condom-trap, a sort of serrate internal condom – not for sale – that prevents men from abusing women.

It takes too long. There were some contents that were not true because we looked for the virality. And they became viral but I had doubts. You get critics but no legal problems.”

Some of his most successful pieces are “A husband is 10 times more stressful than children, study says” and “Courts confirmed that triple vaccine (SRP) causes autism”.

4. COUNTERMEASURES

As amply illustrated, fake news are an international problem. Democracy is based on the power to the people. Usually the people act on the basis of what they think is right and what is wrong. Turning the tables of truth with unfair tricks such as denying the empirical evidence with fake news to earn consensus means hardly undermining the basis of democracy. If the perception of truth and falsehood is subverted, the immediate result will be a total political chaos. After pointing out the biggest risks and the main dynamics at play, it is advisable to list the best purposes to save the day. “The science of fake news”, published on Science on the 9th of March 2018, the possible interventions can be divided in two categories: “those aimed at empowering individuals to evaluate the fake news they encounter” and “structural changes aimed at preventing exposure of individuals to fake news in the first instance”.

4.1 EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS

Talking about singular persons, the article says that “there are many forms of fact checking, from websites that evaluate factual claims of news reports, such as PolitiFact and Snopes, to evaluations of news reports by credible news media, such as the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, to contextual information regarding content inserted by intermediaries, such as those used by Facebook.”

About fact checking, it has to be said that the United States are not the only country where these organs are present. For example, in Italy there are multiple websites such as BUTAC, Bufale.net and David Puente, a greatly talented Italian debunker. These portals daily unmask fabricated news with concrete elements that can be official declarations, govern data or simple arguments – just like American debunkers do. By typing the desired word in the search box, every website is able to provide all the news that involve that word. Basically the user is making use of a small search engine specifically created for fake news.

Here follows a list of different fact checking websites divided by nationalities:

- **United States:** Snopes, FactCheck, PolitiFact, Check Your Fact, Climate Feedback, Lead Stories, The Washington Post Fact Checker, The Weekly Standard Fact Check, AP Fact Check;
- **Brazil:** Agência Lupa, Agência Publica – Truco, Aos Fatos;
- **Mexico:** Animal Político - El Sabueso;
- **Argentina:** Chequeado;
- **Colombia:** Colombiacheck, La Silla Vacía;
- **United Kingdom:** Full Fact, FactCheckNI, Ferret Fact Service;
- **Ireland:** TheJournal.ie Fact Check;
- **Sweden:** Dagens Nyheter, Viralgranskaren;
- **Denmark:** Tjekdet.dk;
- **Norway:** Faktisk.no;
- **Netherlands:** Nieuwscheckers, NU.nl;
- **Germany:** Correctiv.org;
- **France:** AFP Factuel, CheckNews, 20 Minutes Fake Off, France 24 – Les Observateurs, Le Monde – Les Décodeurs;
- **Czech Republic:** Demagog.cz;
- **Turkey:** Doğruluk Payı, teyit.org;
- **Georgia:** FactCheck Georgia;
- **Kazakhstan:** Factcheck.kz;
- **Kosovo:** Krypometri;
- **Croatia:** Faktograf;
- **Serbia:** Istinomer;
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Istinomjer;
- **Ukraine:** VoxCheck;
- **Italy:** BUTAC, Bufale, David Puente, La Voce, Pagella Politica;
- **Spain:** Maldito Buló, El Objetivo de Ana Pastor;
- **Portugal:** Observador Fact-Check;
- **Kenya:** Pesa Check;
- **Nigeria:** Dubawa - Premium Times Center for Investigative Journalism;
- **South Africa:** Africa Check;
- **India:** BOOM, FactChecker.in;
- **Philippines:** Rappler, VERA Files Fact Check;
- **Indonesia:** Cek Fakta – Liputan 6, Mafindo, Tempo.co, Tirto.id;
- **Australia:** The Conversation Australia, RMIT ABC Fact Check;
- **Israel:** The Whistle;

Most of these organizations joined the **International Fact Checking Network (IFCN)** Code of Principles that are “a series of commitments organizations abide by to promote excellence in fact-checking.” Someone, indeed, might think – maliciously or in good faith – that fact checkers follow the dictates of a mighty unknown tycoon or politician, protecting his interests by covering up certain negative events. In order to avoid these thoughts, the IFCN Code of Principles aims at making fact checking websites more authoritative and acknowledged as official organisms that deserve the average user’s trust.

The first commitment deals with **Non-partisanship and Fairness**: organizations that signed the Code must undertake to fact check claims using the same standard for every case. Signatories must focus their attention to both sides of politics, implying what ancient Latins would call “par condicio” – same condition.

The second commitment is about something that is always absent in fake news: the **Transparency of Sources**. “Signatories want readers to be able to verify findings themselves” – says the Code. Details are crucial so that everyone can replicate their work, apart cases where the source’s health is at risk.

The third IFCN commitment is **Transparency of Funding and Organization**. Lots of people tend to be mistrustful about the reason behind this kind of organizations: if you discredit fake news that favor their beloved party, you must be paid by some political opponents. This part aims at showing that fact checkers have no conflict of interest with the conclusions they reach. In addition fact checkers must be contactable and their professional background is often detailed.

The fourth commitment imposes the **Transparency of Methodology**. Signatories explain the methods used to research, write and correct their fact checks.

The fifth and last commitment contemplates an **Open and Honest Corrections Policy**. Nobody is perfect, so fact checkers choose a corrections policy and follow it scrupulously to guarantee the readers the corrected version.



Once every commitment is respected and the Code is signed, the fact checking website can proudly show the IFCN badge, letting the readers know that every single piece of news will be analyzed in the best way.

Although, Science in says³⁸ that “despite the apparent elegance of fact checking, the science supporting its efficacy is, at best, mixed.” The explanation can be found in a human inner aspect: whenever a piece of information violates our preconceptions we tend to question the credibility of the source. In addition, we tend to align our beliefs with the values of our community, according to Science.

Psychology can be useful in this moment to explain the average user’s behavior: while surfing the net, users prefer to receive information that confirms their beliefs. This circumstance is called **selective exposure**.

There is another phenomenon that explains the success of fake news: **confirmation bias**. Because of this, human beings consider information that is consistent with their preexisting belief as more likely to be believed.

As reported in the article – last but not least – **desirability bias** influence internet users. No matter the source of a piece of news, we usually accept information that pleases us. So, if a right-sided man reads fake news against immigrants, he is more likely to believe them than real news that actually favor immigrants. As a further matter, the Science of fake news says:

“Fact checking might even be counterproductive under certain circumstances. Research on fluency—the ease of information recall—and familiarity bias in politics shows that people tend to remember information, or how they feel about it, while forgetting the context within which they encountered it. Moreover, they are more likely to accept familiar information as true. There is thus a risk that repeating false information, even in a fact-checking context, may increase an individual’s likelihood of accepting it as true.”

Anyway, it is not sure that repeating fake news to unmask them is dangerous:

³⁸ “The science of fake news” – 3/09/2018

“Although experimental and survey research have confirmed that the perception of truth increases when misinformation is repeated, this may not occur if the misinformation is paired with a valid retraction. Some research suggests that repetition of the misinformation before its correction may even be beneficial. Further research is needed to reconcile these contradictions and determine the conditions under which fact-checking interventions are most effective. Another, longer-run, approach seeks to improve individual evaluation of the quality of information sources through education. There has been a proliferation of efforts to inject training of critical-information skills into primary and secondary schools. However, it is uncertain whether such efforts improve assessments of information credibility or if any such effects will persist over time. An emphasis on fake news might also have the unintended consequence of reducing the perceived credibility of realnews outlets. There is a great need for rigorous program evaluation of different educational interventions.”

Many good initiatives are active, such as the Italian *AskPinocchio*³⁹, but their advertising is really lacking. Communication teaches that something that is not reported is almost inexistent.

4.2 STRUCTURAL CHANGES: SOCIAL NETWORKS

Also in this case, “The science of fake news” is extremely useful. It has been previously said that fake news spread thanks to modern means of communication as Internet. Along with this, it highlights the cheapness to create a realnews-like website and the easiness of monetizing from these websites through ads and social networks.

About social networks it is relevant that “about 47% of Americans overall report getting news from social media often or sometimes, with Facebook as, by far, the dominant source.”

Whether or not social networks are responsible for this scenario, Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram should fight fake news because, even if at first there is an increase of in-

³⁹ AskPinocchio (askpinocchio.com) is a web portal where every user can verify single articles written in Italian by inserting the link in the system to understand whether it is fake news or not.

teractions, the long term effect might be that social networks will totally lose their credibility and users might begin to leave them.

The authors of the article suggest a solution: social networks “use complex statistical models to predict and maximize engagement with content. It should be possible to adjust those models to increase emphasis on quality information. The platforms could provide consumers with signals of source quality that could be incorporated into the algorithmic rankings of content.”

Furthermore bots are often involved in the process of spreading fabricated news, as stated by MIT Technology Review⁴⁰. Because of this, Science supports the idea that “functions that emphasize currently trending content could seek to exclude bot activity from measures of what is trending”.

What has been done so far? Facebook expressed an “intent to shift its algorithm to account for quality” its contents and Twitter blocked accounts linked to Russian misinformation but it is particularly hard to say if there have been improvements because “the platforms have not provided enough detail for evaluation by the research community or subjected their findings to peer review, making them problematic for use by policy-makers or the general public.”

In this regard, Tessa Lyons, Facebook Product Manager, portrayed the situation via the Facebook Newsroom:

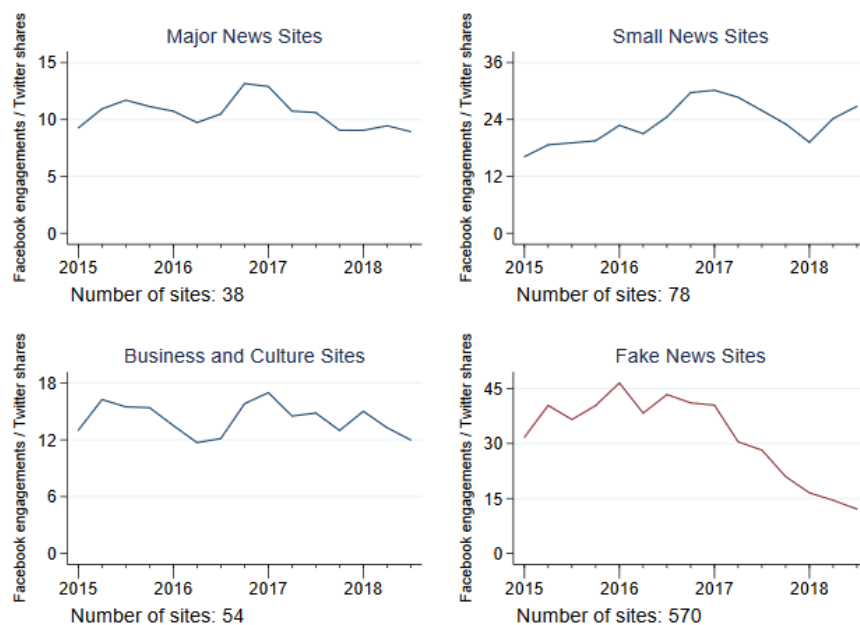
“Misinformation is also an ever-evolving problem. Its purveyors are continually trying new tactics to seed it, so we’re constantly updating our approach to catching it. Because it’s evolving, we’ll never be able to catch every instance of false news — though we can learn from the things we do miss. As a company, one of our biggest priorities is understanding the total volume of misinformation on Facebook and seeing that number trend downward.”

⁴⁰ “First Evidence That Social Bots Play a Major Role in Spreading Fake News” – 8/7/2017

To support their results, Tessa Lyons showed three different pieces of research conducted by the University of Stanford, the University of Michigan and the French newspaper Le Monde. None of them was funded or given data by Facebook.

According to these three different methodologies and definitions of false news, “the overall volume of false news on Facebook is trending downward, and as Alcott, Gentzkow and Yu note, efforts by Facebook following the 2016 election to limit the diffusion of misinformation may have had a meaningful impact.”

The first study⁴¹ accomplished by the **University of Stanford** is conceptually simple: chosen 570 sites identified as false news sources, the volume of Facebook engagements and Twitter shares was measured for all stories published since January 2015 until July 2018. Hunt Alcott, Matthew Gentzkow and Chuan Yu found out that engagements have slowly decreased and are now less than a half 2016 elections level.



The **University of Michigan** published a piece of research⁴² based on the concept of the “Iffy Quotient”. The Michigan News prepared a list of websites that usually publish false stories by consulting two organizations called Media Bias/Fact Check and Open Sources.

⁴¹ “Trends in the Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media” – Alcott, Gentzkow, Yu – 09/2018

⁴² “Iffy Quotient: A Platform Health Metric for Misinformation” – Resnick, Ovadya, Gilchrist – 10/10/2018

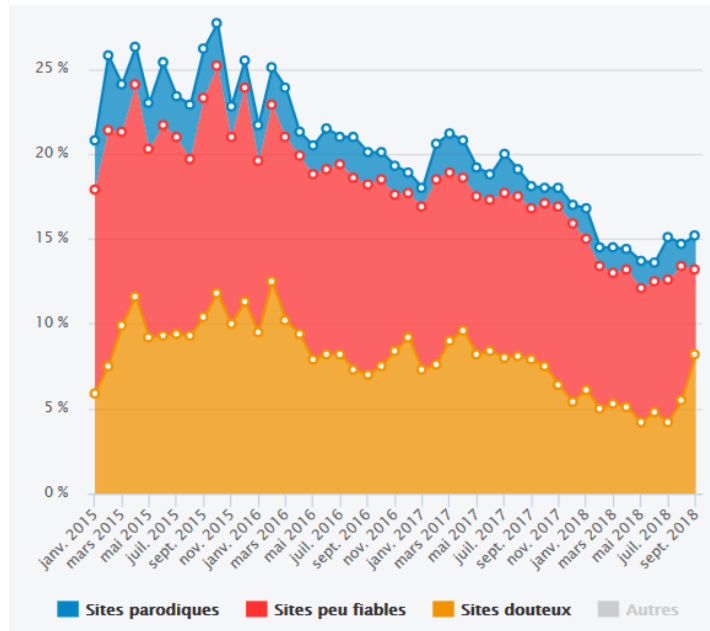
The term “iffy” refers the uncertainty of the source because all judgments made by these organizations are purely human and not supported by empirical data. The Iffy Quotient is nothing but the quantity of these stories that is diffused via Facebook and Twitter.



As it is visible in the graphic, Facebook’s Iffy Quotient – meaning all fake news clicked, liked and shared – had two peaks before and right after the general election, before going down to pre-election levels and losing more than a half of its potential. Meanwhile, Twitter administrators were not able to do the same for their social network.

Shifting our focus to France, one of the fact checkers we already mentioned, “Les Décodeurs” of **Le Monde**, released research⁴³ about *fausses informations*, the French term for fake news. Similarly to other studies, social media engagement was the object of research. Les Décodeurs analyzed this variable in Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit for 630 French websites divided in three categories: unreliable or dubious sites (*sites peu fiables*), less reliable sites (*sites douteux*) and more recommendable sites.

⁴³ “Les fausses informations circulent de moins en moins sur Facebook” – Adrien Sénecat, 10/17/2018



As claimed by French fact checkers, the engagement for unreliable or dubious sites – therefore linkable to fake news – has halved in France since 2015. Less reliable sites followed a similar trend from 2015 to the beginning of 2017 and its engagement is now lower than what it was in 2015. Considering the dangerous effects of satirical websites (*sites parodiques*), this fourth category suffered the same negative trend of unreliable or dubious sites.

How was this possible?

Tessa Lyons explained⁴⁴ every action undertaken by Facebook in order to reduce the entity of false news:

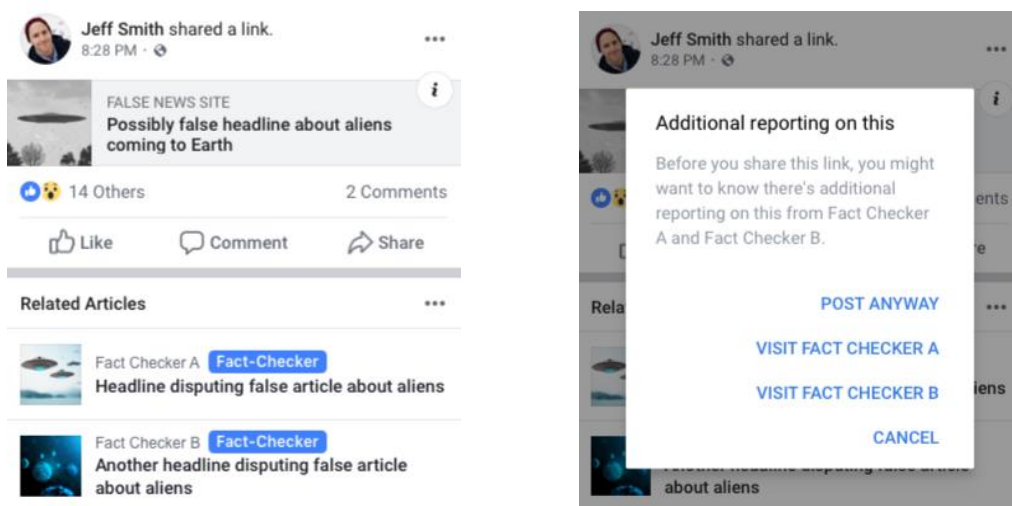
1. We use technology to identify potentially false stories. For example, when people on Facebook submit feedback about a story being false or comment on an article expressing disbelief, these are signals that a story should be reviewed. In the US, we can also use machine learning based on past articles that fact-checkers have reviewed. And recently we gave fact-checkers the option to proactively identify stories to rate.

⁴⁴ “Hard Questions: How Is Facebook’s Fact-Checking Program Working?” – Facebook Newsroom – 6/14/2018

2. Fact-checkers provide a rating and reference article. Independent third-party fact-checkers review the stories, rate their accuracy and write an article explaining the facts behind their rating.

3. We demote links rated false and provide more context on Facebook. If a story is rated false, we reduce its distribution in News Feed. We let people who try to share the story know there's more reporting on the subject, and we notify people who shared it earlier. We also show the fact-checkers' reference article in Related Articles immediately below the story in News Feed.

4. We take action against repeat offenders. If a Facebook Page or website repeatedly shares misinformation, we'll reduce the overall distribution of the Page or website, not just individual false articles. We'll also cut off their ability to make money or advertise on our services.



A key-point in this process is the participation of fact checking organizations. Facebook is a multinational corporation with a billionaire revenue but, even if there are thousands of employees all over the world, Facebook alone cannot solve the problem of fake news.

For this reason the company of Mark Zuckerberg needs the support of third parties, in this case fact checkers. In this regard, Facebook collaborates only with organizations that signed the **International Fact Checking Network** Code of Principles.

When a fact checker receives a potential fake story, this can be judged as:

1. **False:** The primary claim(s) of the content are factually inaccurate. This generally corresponds to “false” or “mostly false” ratings on fact-checkers' sites.

2. **Mixture:** The claim(s) of the content are a mix of accurate and inaccurate, or the primary claim is misleading or incomplete.
3. **True:** The primary claim(s) of the content are factually accurate. This generally corresponds to “true” or “mostly true” ratings on fact-checkers' sites.
4. **Not eligible:** The content contains a claim that is not verifiable, was true at the time of writing, comes from another social platform, or from a website or Page with the primary purpose of expressing the opinion or agenda of a political figure.
5. **Satire:** The content is posted by a Page or domain that is a known satire publication, or a reasonable person would understand the content to be irony or humor with a social message. It still may benefit from additional context.
6. **Opinion:** The content expresses a personal opinion, advocates a point of view (e.g., on a social or political issue), or is self-promotional. This includes, but is not limited to, content shared from a website or Page with the main purpose of expressing the opinions or agendas of public figures, think tanks, NGOs, and businesses.
7. **Prank generator:** Websites that allow users to create their own “prank” news stories to share on social media sites.
8. **Not rated:** This is the default state before fact-checkers have fact-checked content or if the URL is broken. Leaving it in this state (or returning to this rating from another rating) means that we should take no action based on your rating.

Despite everything, this process ignores fake news based on images, very common in Italy. Therefore Facebook implemented photos in the fact checking system.

Antonia Woodford, Product Manager, explained⁴⁵:

“Similar to our work for articles, we have built a machine learning model that uses various engagement signals, including feedback from people on Facebook, to identify potentially false content. We then send those photos and videos to fact-checkers for their review, or fact-checkers can surface content on their own. Many of our third-party fact-checking partners have expertise evaluating photos and videos and are trained in visual verification techniques, such as reverse image searching and analyzing image metadata, like when and where the photo or video was taken. [...]

As we get more ratings from fact-checkers on photos and videos, we will be able to improve the accuracy of our machine learning model. We are also leveraging other

⁴⁵ “Expanding Fact-Checking to Photos and Videos” – Facebook Newsroom – 9/13/2018

technologies to better recognize false or misleading content. For example, we use optical character recognition (OCR) to extract text from photos and compare that text to headlines from fact-checkers' articles. We are also working on new ways to detect if a photo or video has been manipulated.”

These results could be perceived as good enough but Tessa Lyons does not seem satisfied yet in its article⁴⁶. First of all, fact checkers do not exist in all countries and “different places have different standards of journalism as well as varying levels of press freedom”. Even when fact checking organizations are present, human resources are not sufficient to review all potentially false sentences. Secondly it takes hours or days – usually 3 days, according⁴⁷ to Dan Zigmund, Director of Analytics at Facebook – to fact check a single claim and the majority of false sentences spread to other websites. And on top of that, most false stories spread to other sites, making the fact checkers’ work harder and harder. “To make real progress, we have to keep improving our machine learning and trying other tactics that can work around the world” – says Lyons.

4.3 STRUCTURAL CHANGES: GOVERNMENT MEASURES

For these reasons, it is clear that now the ball is in national parliaments, paying attention to the mechanism chosen to fight fake news. Frequently political exponents are accused of supporting censorship whenever someone proposes to prevent people from inventing news. The following information will be taken from a document produced by the Poynter Institute on the 22nd of May 2018 and called “**A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world**” by Daniel Funke.

⁴⁶ “*Hard Questions: How Is Facebook’s Fact-Checking Program Working?*” – Facebook Newsroom – 6/14/2018

⁴⁷ “*Machine Learning, Fact-Checkers and the Fight Against False News*” – Facebook Newsroom – 4/8/2018

BRAZIL

Starting from the country that recently had its elections, Brazil chose the rightist former military Jair Bolsonaro as the new president. As reported by Aos Fatos, the elections were deeply influenced by multiple fake news⁴⁸ shared in WhatsApp and Facebook that favored one candidate, in this case the winner, and that might have reached millions of Brazilians.



 FENAPEF
@FENAPEF

Polícia Federal dará início nos próximos dias em Brasília às atividades de um grupo especial formado para combater notícias falsas durante o processo eleitoral. A medida tem o objetivo de identificar e punir autores de "fake news" contra ou a favor dos candidatos.

4:49 PM - Jan 9, 2018

In January 2018 the Federal Police – FENAPEF – announced via Twitter the creation of a task force to “identify and punish the authors of fake news”.

The Brazilian Congress made 20 draft bills against the spread of fabricated news and penalties include fines starting at USD 400 to up to eight years of prison. The problem of this legislation is the disagreement over who should be punished among creators of fake news, sharers or content providers.

CROATIA

Croatian situation seems particular: the Poynter says that the Parliament announced the production of a draft bill that aims at halting the spread of hate speech and fake news on social media platforms. Mostly concentrated on Facebook, the bill’s objective is educating citizens to avoid the spread of misinformation. Fact checkers doubt the efficacy of the specifics and, as reported by the Croatian television Večernji, the law does not have enforceable actions to fight fake news.

⁴⁸ “*Brasile, allarme fake news su WhatsApp alle presidenziali. Il Tribunale elettorale: «Ci vogliono misure severe»* - Corriere della Sera – Rocco Cotroneo, 10/16/2018

FRANCE

In January 2018, President Emmanuel Macron said during a press conference that he would have presented the so called “Fake news” law to oppose the diffusion of misinformation in politics.

Thanks to this proposed law, authorities will have the power to remove the spread of fake stories via social media and even block the sites that publish it. The law has three main measures:

1. The Superior Audiovisual Council – the regulator of France’s media – will be able to fight “any attempt at destabilization” from foreign TV channels – probably a reference to what happened in the United States – by suspending or revoking media from false outlets;
2. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube will be compelled to publish the names of who purchased sponsored contents or campaign ads.
3. Citizens will obtain summary rules from judges about the goodness of a piece of news.

INDONESIA

Even the far Indonesia has to deal with misinformation problems and for this reason President Joko Widodo formed the National Cyber and Encryption Agency to reduce the effect of hoaxes online misinformation before the latest elections of this summer.

The agency hired hundreds of people to protect institutions’ web portals. Alleged perpetrators of online misinformation have been arrested and many websites that publish harmful contents have been blocked. As stated by the Jakarta Post, social medias are collaborating with the government to neutralize fake contents and illegal media. In January 2018 the government deployed a tool that “allegedly automatically” individuates website that publish fake news.

In September 2018, the Communications Minister Rudiantara told⁴⁹ CNN Indonesia that "Every week we will announce hoax news. The ministry will not just stamp a story as hoax, but we will also provide facts."

ITALY

A few weeks before the general election, the Democratic Party and the Italian government announced on the 18th of January 2018 the creation of a Google document called "Ripuliamo Facebook" (literally Let's clean Facebook) to report fake news with more than 1000 interactions.



The text, written by Matteo Orfini, member of the Partito Democratico, says:

"Now the limit has really been reached: I did not expect anything from them, but at least I hoped that in front of death and sufferance they would have stopped. But I was wrong, the scheme is always the same: Di Maio and Salvini attack our party with lies and their powerful mud machine starts on the social networks. Unofficial pages create, amplify and share fake news and extremely violent accuses. Stop, this time we're going to report everything to the Police. [...] We need your help: report us everything you find in the net and help us to make this work more capillary. We will not solve the problem

⁴⁹ "Indonesia's government is to hold public fake news briefings every week" – CNBC – Lucy Hadley, 9/27/2018

in this way but we will try and fight it for real. Do not let these dumb people foul up the public debate”

This document – not a website – prompts users for an email address, a link to the fake news and any social networks where the content is present and then reports everything to the Polizia Postale, a law enforcement unit against cyber crimes.

KENYA

Surely this country is not known for its freedom of speech and it could be analyzed to define the correct limits of law against fake news. In May, President Uhuru Kenyatta signed a bill to criminalize 17 different cybercrimes: among them there are cyberbullying, espionage, computer forgery and of course, fake news.

Under this law, who knowingly shares false information to make it look real can be fined up to \$ 50,000 or jailed for up to two years. Because of the vague definition of fake news, the Parliament asked to review the law to avoid the risk of censorship. Six days before the ratification of this law, the Committee to Protect Journalists strongly admonished it because it would “criminalize free speech, with journalists and bloggers likely to be among the first victims.”

MALAYSIA

Since April, sharing fake news is a crime. The punishment provided by the law include jail up to six years and a fine of \$128,000, it makes online service providers more responsible for third-party content and it affects foreign news outlets about Malaysia. As seen in Kenya, this law exposes anyone’s free speech to be censored because of the vagueness of the definition of fake news: “any news, information, data and reports which are wholly or partly false, whether in the form of features, visuals or audio recordings or in any other form capable of suggesting words or ideas”

PHILIPPINES

In February 2018, the Senate’s Committee on Public Information prepared a bill against government officials who spread false information. Many referred to this measure as unconstitutional and the President Rodrigo Duterte said multiple times that this law

would never pass. Along the lines of Donald Trump, Duterte called “fake news” all the media outlets he dislikes and “even he has been accused of misinformation himself”.

SINGAPORE

Since January 2018 a Committee set up by the Parliament has been working on possible solutions against the germ of fake news. Eight months later, in September, the Committee declared⁵⁰ that a government intervention is necessary because Singapore is “a target of hostile information campaigns” and different cultures in the country imply “wide opportunities for falsehoods to undermine Singapore's social cohesion.” The Committee also made 22 recommendations and even though some of these are quite specific – “quality journalism” made of journalists who “proactively find ways to update their skills in digital fact-checking” – some others seem hazy, such as “the government should have the powers to swiftly disrupt the spread and influence of online falsehoods.” The definition of falsehood will be made by the Parliament but the Human Rights Watch warned that Singaporeans might face “severe restrictions on their basic rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly through overly broad criminal laws and regulations.” Singapore is already ranked 151st among 180 countries in 2018 World Press Freedom Index.

SPAIN

In March the Spanish Security Commission of the Congress of Deputies made a proposal to ask the government to react against fabricated news. In this recommendation, the commission requested a cooperation with the European Union to develop new strategies against misinformation. Surprisingly the proposal was voted down by the left-wing parties.

UNITED KINGDOM

Brexit’s aftermaths are evident to anybody. As stated by many⁵¹, fake news deeply influenced the English vote, encouraging voters to leave European Union. In order to counter misinformation, the United Kingdom’s government set up the National Security

⁵⁰ “Singapore set to tackle fake news with new law” – Nikkei Asian Review – Kentaro Iwamoto, 9/20/2018

⁵¹ “Fake news, from Labour ‘mess’ to the Brexit vote” – The Guardian, 8-1-2018

Communications Unit, a team tasked whose target is “combating disinformation by state actors and others.” This choice, probably a reaction after the investigation of Russia’s intent to produce misinformation in the British electoral campaign, “echoes a Cold War-era tactic” – the Poynter says. Because of its generic directives, the initiative seems not to deal specifically with fake news.

UNITED STATES

Following the huge federal investigation better known as Russiagate that might involve the Russians in an attempt to shift the balance of 2016 US elections towards Donald Trump, the Congress announced a bill in October 2017: online platforms such as Facebook and Google should release data about who makes ads and how much the payment is, trying to put social media companies at the same level of radio and television.

5. CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this path among fake news, what can be said about the actual political scenario? Fabricating news is surely not a newly invented activity, thanks to centuries of practice in the past. What is new is the rapidity of diffusion provided by our means of communication, Internet in particular, with devastating consequences: anywhere in the world one person writes an article or creates an image totally false about someone else, delivers it to certain communication channels – websites, social networks and social media in general – and, if the piece of news is properly prepared, Bob's your uncle. Tens, hundreds, thousands – and in lucky cases – millions people will share your content and this will definitely ruin the reputation of the person concerned, producing the desired effect to indirectly favour one person over another.

The not-so-slow infection of fake news in the world started in the United States in 2016 in order to favour one candidate: Donald Trump. It is impossible to state whether disinformation made him win or not. However the enormous reach of pro-Trump fake news was so big and the victory margin in elections was so small that we could have reasonably expected a different outcome without falsehoods.

Subsequently, as warned by different sources, the public opinion in Italy was bigly contaminated by disinformation during the months before the 2018 general election. This deliberate manipulation of truth is referable at 5 Stars Movement and right-wing Italian parties. Also in this case, the side that indirectly – or directly – made a large use of fake news, won the election and it would be pure science-fiction to define the percentage of voters shifted from one party to another thanks to this unfair expedient.

Even if it is not included in this work, another case study could be elaborated on: Brazil. As reported by different journalistic sources, Jair Bolsonaro's team deliberately shared fake news that favoured the former military and this effort was rewarded with victory. Perfectly knowing that demonstrating a correlation between an election victo-

ry and sharing fake news would be incredibly difficult, someone could say that three coincidences are a proof.

Although, there is a major explanation for the success of disinformation worldwide: selective exposure, confirmation and desirability bias strongly conditioned the final result of this process. No matter how coarse and ungrammatical the content is, if the recipient is well-disposed he will believe anything. Once disinformation – and in some cases misinformation – made its effects, any eventual attempts to diffuse the truth will be vane because the message will never be able to reach the same people who received the corrupt message.

About the characteristics of these messages, this thesis focused on two different types of fabricated news: written articles and images.

Regarding articles, there are no doubts about the strong presence of ads in every fake news website which means large incomes for the owners of the web domain. Most of the time, these articles – usually showing grammatical mistakes or syntactic imprecision – appear miles away from a journalistic content, even if there are a few exceptions that are often satire.

Concerning images, the matter is simple: the photo of a famous person with an Impact font is frequently as an authoritative source, no matter the wrong grammar or the real identity of the person that is portrayed.

In this highly dangerous situation, governments seem to be totally incapable of stopping this mass of fake news. On the contrary, some presidents ride these circumstances to get more consensus and in illiberal democracies an eventual legislation about fake news is used in lieu of censorship to silence opponents.

Meanwhile Facebook appears the only body determined to reduce the effect of disinformation with concrete measures and the fruit of these actions are demonstrated by different pieces of research. Unfortunately Twitter, another protagonist in the world of social networks, definitely cannot follow the footsteps of Facebook and fake news are still strongly present in that social network.

Considering the current situation in Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and the political trend all over the world, it seems that there will still be much left to do for fact checkers in the next years because this new political ingredient appears far away from its end. Probably the only antidote against this information virus is a true education in computer technology for teens and adults in order to make Internet users immune to disinformation.

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