FAUSTO COLOMBO - MARIA FRANCESCA MURRU - SIMONE TOSONI*

THE POST-INTERMEDIATION OF TRUTH
Newsmaking from Media Companies to Platform**

Abstract

"Post-truth", the 2016 word of the year, has been defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". In fact, the notion risks becoming little more than a buzzword, given that the epistemic, social, political, and cultural issues at stake behind the current debate on Post-Truth are so numerous, so differentiated and intertwined. Scholars are thus required to undertake interpretative efforts in several research directions, in order to understand both its scope and actual novelty. The paper interrogates one of the main topics debated under the label of post-truth: the circulation of fake news, that is news stating false facts or events within a "veridictive" – and not satirical or parodistic – register. By addressing the traditional and long-lasting debate on the supposed disintermediation of traditional media agencies in the internet era, the analysis here developed tries to identify and explain the emergence of new dynamics of intermediation, detectable at the institutional, technological and social levels. The paper focuses on the new and as yet undetermined role played by the institutional subjects of intermediation, such as platforms owners and service providers; at the same time, it addresses the ways in which the space of news circulation is currently shaped by the automatisms of algorithms. In our conclusive remarks we clarify how these two perspectives should be integrated with a specific focus on the understudied forms of social consumption of fake news on the internet and through social media.

Keywords
Newsmaking; intermediation; media platform; sns algorithms; fake news.

1. INTRODUCTION

The debates over "post-truth" that are still raging in international media after the UK vote in favour of Brexit and Donald Trump's election certainly inspire concern, but also some scepticism. In front of a political course held at the same time as undesirable and uninterpretable, pundits have highlighted the vulnerability of the present media system to biased, partisan and false information. A growing moral panic brings analysts to point their fingers to falling journalistic and political ethics, as forms of "alt.ethics [or] ethical systems in which dissembling is considered okay, not necessarily wrong, therefore not really 'dishonest' in the negative sense of the word[1]", and to people's media

* Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan – fausto.colombo@unicatt.it; maria.murru@unicatt.it; simone.tosoni@unicatt.it.
** The article has been conceived and developed collaboratively by all the authors. However, the writing process has been divided among them according to the following structure: par. 2 and par. 4 has been written by F. Colombo, par. 3 has been written by M.F. Murru, par. 1 has been written by S. Tosoni, par. 5 has been written jointly by M.F. Murru and S. Tosoni.
[1] R. Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004, 13.

illiteracy, that would expose them to deception and manipulation[2]. What engenders our scepticism is not the relevance of the somehow heterogeneous media phenomena that go under the label of "post-truth" – from fake news to the transformation of journalistic ethics and practices[3], from religious othering and racist populism[4] to anti-science online groups[5], from the systematic use of lies in the political debate to the arise of "emotional public sphere[6]". Rather, what puzzles us as media scholar is the simplistic hypothesis that these phenomena are to be explained at the light of a major shift in western liberal democracies, and more in general in western culture. As implied by the prefix "post" in "post-truth", this would have in fact instituted an unprecedented relationship with truth, introducing us to "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" – as for the official definition with which The Oxford Dictionary has elected "post-truth" as word of the year for 2016, after its usage rocketed of a 2000% over the previous year.

Actually, this journalistic hypothesis has been advanced, and is being discussed, within a non uncontroversial and non conclusive academic discussion on fake news, political lies, and "regimes of truth" in present western societies, that media have popularized, oversimplified (how to define an objective fact? And a personal belief?) and somehow resolved. For some authors, political lies and fake news would in fact simply be part of a different relationship with truth affecting western societies at all its levels, from the political sphere to people's daily lives. Keyes[7] talks about a "post-truth era" where the "truth bias" – the assumption that "whatever someone tells […] is more likely to be true than false[8]"– has become weaker, opening the ground to a "looser" relationship with deception. The author attributes its origin to a plurality of factors: the weakening of personal and communitarian ties, the "hollywoodization" of contemporary culture, the influence on society of baby boomers' cohort's culture and ethics, the new format of so-called "new journalism" (that would privilege the elegance of story-telling over the rigour of fact checking and reporting), the widespread diffusion of Internet "anonymous communication" (*sic*!), and so on and so forth, throwing in the mix also the relativism promoted by academic postmodernism. Jason Harsin[9], on the other hand, dismisses the hypothesis of a general demise of truth regimes in favour of a looser relationship with deception, and mobilizes this same postmodernist academic tradition (in particular, Deleuze's analysis of the shift from discipline to control societies) to point

[2] K. Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth", *The Guardian*, 12 July 2016, accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth; K. Higgens, "Post-Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed", *Nature*, 540, 9 (2016); B. Tallis, "Living in Post-Truth: Power/Knowledge/Responsibility", *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations*, 24, 1 (2016): 7-18; P. Bilgin, "Resisting Post-Truth Politics, a Primer: Or, How Not to Think about Human Mobility and the Global Environment", *Global Policy*, 8 (2017): 55-59.

[3] R. Dickinson, "Making Up the News: Journalists, Deviance and Social Control in News Production", in *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, edited by S. Allan, New York: Routledge, 2010, 221-233.

[4] C. George, *Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

[5] A. Kata, "Anti-Vaccine Activists, Web 2.0, and the Postmodern Paradigm: An Overview of Tactics and Tropes Used Online by the Anti-Vaccination Movement", *Vaccine*, 30, 25 (2012): 3778-3789.

[6] P. Lunt, P. Stenner, "The Jerry Springer Show as an Emotional Public Sphere", *Media, Culture & Society*, 27, 1 (2005): 59-81.

[7] Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*.

[8] *Ibid.*, 213.

[9] J. Harsin, "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies", *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8, 2 (2015): 327-333.

out how it would be better to talk about a plurality of "truth markets" coexisting within a new "regime of post-truth". This transformation of the foucaldian "regimes of truth[10]" would depend on a structural re-articulation of "the news apparatus" into "a many-headed hydra […] with literally millions of channels, websites, social media feeds[11]" where "populations corresponding to beliefs and opinions are planned, produced, and managed by big data-driven predictive analytics and resource-rich strategic communication[12]". Other authors, conversely, are more openly critical to the hypothesis of a post-truth era. Focusing in particular on political lying, Kay Mathiesen and Don Fallis[13] point out how it would make no sense to lie if a "lie bias" had replaced a "truth bias". Instead, they recur to an approach based on social epistemology to tackle how politician can still be effective in deceiving in a context characterized by the "ubiquity of political lying". More Radically, Roberto Campa[14] vigorously dismisses the idea of an era of post-truth politics and mobilizes Mannheim's sociology of knowledge to point out how the "normality" of the present situation – and the debate over post-truth itself – can be interpreted as part of an ongoing political confrontation which sees a globalist ideology opposed to a sovereign ideology.

Far for providing a systematic map of the current debate, this quick overview intends to show how the notion of post-truth risks to be not much more than a buzzword given that plurality of intertwined epistemic, social, political, and cultural issues at stake. In our view, the first step media scholar should take to address the problem is to try to disentangle the richness and the complexity of the multiple dimensions that are implied by the phenomena currently addressed by the label "post-truth". Moreover, not to surrender to the moral panic triggered by journalistic alarmism, such an operation should be performed at least on the background of the historical development of 25 years of Internet Studies. As a first contribution in this direction, we intend to interrogate one of the main "debated topics" under the label of post-truth: the circulation of fake news: news stating false facts or events within a veridictive – and not satirical or parodistic – register. We will interrogate this topic from the perspective of the transformation of intermediation processes in the production and circulation of news. By addressing the traditional and long lasting debate on the supposed disintermediation of traditional media agencies in the internet era[15], the analysis here developed will try to identify and explain the emergence of new dynamics of intermediation, detectable at the institutional, technological and social level. Our main interest is not, in fact, to discuss the supposed novelty of the phenomenon of fake news, or of its magnitudo – as implied in the debate on post-truth. Rather, we aim at clarifying the new conditions for their

---

[10] See also J.Z. Bratich, "Regime-of-Truth Change", *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, 4, 2 (2004): 237-241.

[11] Harsin, "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies", 329.

[12] *Ibid.*, 330.

[13] K. Mathiesen, D. Fallis, "'The Greatest Liar Has His Believers'. The Social Epistemology of Political Lying" in *Ethics in Politics*, edited by E. Crookston, D. Killoren, J. Trerise, New York: Routledge, 2017: 35-53.

[14] R. Campa, "Post-truth. La lezione dimenticata della sociologia della conoscenza", *Orbis Idearum*, 4, 1 (2016): 97-115.

[15] R. Gellman, "Disintermediation and the Internet", *Government Information Quarterly*, 13, 1 (1996): 1-8; J.B. Singer, "Still Guarding the Gate? The Newspaper Journalist's Role in an On-line World", *Convergence*, 3, 1 (1997): 72-89; M. Deuze, "Online Journalism: Modelling the First Generation of News Media on the World Wide Web", *First Monday*, 6, 10 (2001), accessed 26 April 2017, http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/893/802; J. Hall, *Online Journalism: A Critical Primer*, London: Pluto Press, 2001. A. Hermida, "Twittering the News", *Journalism Practice*, 4, 3 (2010): 297-308; A. Bessi, W. Quattrociocchi, "Disintermediation: Digital Wildfires in the Age of Misinformation", *AQ - Australian Quarterly*, 86, 4 (2015): 34-39

production and circulation. To address this topic, we will focus on the new, and still un-determined role played by the institutional subjects of intermediation, such as platforms owners and service providers; at the same time, we will address the ways in which the space of news circulation is currently shaped by the automatisms of algorithms. In our conclusive remarks we will clarify how these two perspectives should be integrated with a specific focus on the still understudied forms of social consumption of fake news on the Internet and Social media.

2. RETICENT GATEKEEPERS: THE NEW INTERMEDIARY ROLE OF PLATFORM OWNERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Our approach is therefore to evaluate the altered conditions for the possibility of cre-ating fake news in the current phase of the media system, a constellation that can be described, citing Gitelman, as "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people in the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation"[16]. Re-cently, with reference to all these structures, the French scholar Gérald Bronner[17] has coined the definition "cognitive market", which points out the processes of economic valorisation of the news and that will be useful in our own discourse.

To understand this approach we can start from a well-known case of classic US journalism from 1980 (at a time when the reputation of investigative journalism was particularly high, after the exposé by Bernstein and Woodward, two Washington Post journalists, which broke the Watergate scandal and led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon). This was the article "Jimmy's World" (*Washington Post*, 28 September 1980)[18] by the African-American journalist Janet Cooke, who described the desperate affair of an 8-year-old black child, already a drug addict and the son and nephew of two drug addicts women. The article caused a stir and influenced the perception that the politicians themselves had of the problem of black ghettos. And yet subsequent fact-checking proved the story false. In a famous article (19 April 1981)[19], the *Washington Post* journalist Bill Green described the mechanisms that led to both the publication of the article and the discovery that it was fake. Not only did the people involved and their story seem impossible to verify in reality, but it emerged that when she was hired by the newspaper, Janet Cooke (who in the meantime had received the Pulitzer Prize for her article) had provided false information about her skills, professional experience, and even her degree in journalism. Green's article reported that Cook had taken advantage of certain failings in the newspaper's fact-checking system. Only the routine checks on her curriculum for awarding the Pulitzer exposed the scandal. But in his article about Cook, Green pointed out that the editorial mechanisms at the newspaper were at least partly co-responsible for the construction of the fake news story. Cook's professional laxity, probably accompanied by a tendency towards mythomania, had responded paradoxical-

---

[16] L. Gitelman, *Always Already New. Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, 7.

[17] G. Bronner, *La démocratie des crédules*, Paris: PUF, 2013.

[18] Accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/09/28/jimmys-world/605f237a-7330-4a69-8433-b6da4c519120/?utm_term=.418854105993.

[19] Accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/04/19/the-players-it-wasnt-a-game/545f7157-5228-47b6-8959-fcfcfa8f08eb/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.e0f48be5ffbc.

ly and usefully to the strong pressures from the editorial board for articles of a certain type, presenting emotionally engaging micro-stories with a muck-raking rhetoric.

In short, we can admit, starting from this exemplary case, that fake news is part of the history of journalism and has its specific roots in the mechanisms of the newspaper industry itself, and in the routines and news values of all those involved in the information circuit (newspaper publishers, journalists, readers).

What we are trying to do here is to question what the mechanisms of production, diffusion and success of news in the *current* information market are, starting from the assumption that a new competitive context inevitably affects also the mechanisms of falsification.

What are the characteristics of this phase of the information market? Substantially (in relation to the subject we are dealing with), strong competition between:

– "traditional" newspapers (newspapers, radio and TV news programmes, both in their original form and their online versions);

– new news media based on journalistic assemblage (defined as being exclusively online, and by the lack of fact-checking procedures, by a business model based on network-generated traffic, and by their total or near-total lack of proper professional journalistic skills and regular contracts[20]);

– social platforms on which news of uncertain provenance is published or republished.

As far as the new online headlines are concerned, it has been widely recognized[21] that the crisis of the great modern information systems is leading to a growing proletarianisation of journalistic labour, a reduction in the numbers of journalists in editorial offices and newsrooms, and the montage of news stories from either user-generated content or non-journalistic subjects capable of fabricating news stories characterised not by their status as truth or reliability, but by a strategic goal: to capture readers' attention and get them to click on the link, creating increased network traffic. This change in the process of the economic valorisation of the news-unit also involves its transformation, in the sense that the ultimate goal is not to give an account of a fact but rather to induce the web-surfer to activate the link from their computer, tablet or smartphone. We could say that the traditional logic of newsworthiness[22] which remains essentially unchanged in traditional newspapers, has been largely replaced by the logic of what we can call "click appeal", based on the public's urge to be intrigued and entertained rather than informed, and techically measured as clickthrough rate (CTR)[23].

The episode of Worldpoliticus.com, a site created and managed by a young Macedonian, shown up as a major source of fake news against Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US presidential election[24], clearly demonstrates the way these sites are falsely informative. However, producing false news is just one aspect of the problem we are analysing. By itself such news could not spread so strikingly or sway readers' understanding of

---

[20] R.W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect. How Digital Capitalism is turning the Internet Against Democracy*, New York: The New Press, 2014.

[21] See for instance C. Fuchs, *Social Media. A Critical Introduction*, London: Sage, 2013.

[22] See for instance the traditional literature on the newsmaking process: G. Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1978; H.J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, New York: Vintage, 1979.

[23] CTR is defined as the number of clicks that an item receives divided by the number of times it is shown, expressed as a percentage.

[24] Accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm_term=.kyWq9AGM2Z#.xikX5d0EDr.

the facts so strongly, if their circulation was not favoured by the major digital platforms (the third subject of the current competitive information landscape). The algorithmic logic of their functiong (that will be addressed in the following section) interacted with the "click appeal" of the content to boost the fake news circulation. The platforms, by aggregating news stories and relaunching them, have so far failed to exercise any function of verifying or controlling their reliability: on the contrary, through their visibility mechanisms and viral spread, they appear to promote their sharing. In this sense, Van Dijk[25] is right to state that "social media platforms, rather than being finished products, are dynamic objects that are tweaked in response to their user's needs and their owners' objectives, as well as in reaction to competing platforms and the larger technological and economic infrastructures through which they develop". In fact, fake news sites build their own news (and above all headlines) with mechanisms that encourage the user to click, and they appear – in their sensationalist rhetoric – to be already predisposed for social media sharing.

A recent example is in the Italian news. The president (speaker) of the House of Deputies Laura Boldrini (hence the holder of one of the three highest offices of state), was attacked and insulted on Facebook because of a fake news story about her. The facts are as follows. A pseudo-information site, *La Nozione*, published a story claiming that the president's sister had been assigned the management of some cooperatives dealing with migrants. She had also been given a pension though she was only 35 years old. This was followed by attacks on Boldrini on Facebook. She reacted, as she had done before in similar circumstances, by publishing on her Facebook profile the names of the people who had insulted her, and revealed the story as a fake: her sister had died of an illness some years earlier, and she had been employed in artistic work completely different from that indicated by the website, and consequently none of the accusations made against her had any basis in fact[26].

Following this episode, the newspaper *La Repubblica*[27] contacted one of the people named by Boldrini on her profile. She turned out to be a retiree, who said she was mortified at the error. Here are some excerpts from the interview with her, published by the newspaper:

> I apologise to Laura Boldrini. What else can I do? I was convinced the news was true [...]. I did what I've done many other times. I read the news, I was indignant. And I made all my disgust public [...]. (I read the story and) I thought it was true [...]. People like me, who are in good faith, don't concern themselves much with the details (the fact that the source was an unreliable site – ed.). I realize I could have been more careful, but I admit I fell for it [...]. I'll write to Facebook protesting at the fact that they publish fake news stories. What can we do when we have no way of telling false from true?

The interview is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, because it confirms the important role played by the social platforms. Secondly because the dispute raged on Facebook, which is definitely the most influential Web 2.0 platform. As Van Dijk wrote:

[25] J. Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 7.

[26] Accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.davidpuente.it/blog/2017/04/13/bufala-la-sorella-della-boldrini-pensione-soli-35-anni-10-000e-al-mese/.

[27] Accessed 26 April 2017, http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/04/15/news/_mi_pento_degli_insulti_a_boldrini_contro_le_bufale_siamo_indifesi_-163019708/?ref=RHPPLF-BH-I0-C4-P5-S1.4-T1.

> By implementing various coding technologies and interface strategies, Facebook inscribed
> how online social interaction should be conducted [...]. Facebook's ideology of sharing pret-
> ty much set the standard for the other platforms and the ecosystem as a whole. Because of
> its leading position in the SNS segment, the platform's practice substantially influenced the
> social and cultural norms that bolster legal values such as privacy and control over data[28].

It is therefore in the light of this centrality that we should examine "its coding technolo-
gies" and one of the basic principles of Facebook functioning in defining the conditions
of the circulation of fake news: the algorithmic mediation of its "economies of attention".

3. ECONOMIES OF ATTENTION

According to Lanham[29], we have definitely moved from the economy of things and
objects to an economy of attention. Economy is about the allocation of scarce resources
and what is currently lacking and exceptionally precious in the era of information is
exactly the capacity to pay a focused attention amidst the cacophonous deluge of in-
formation in which we are constantly submerged. The notion of attention economy has
thus been used to indicate the increased competition for people's attention in an infor-
mation environment where scarcity is not bound to money, but rather to attention time.
The specific patterns through which information arises, evolves and circulates within
Facebook and other social networking sites have been widely studied in the last years[30].
With the aim to explore relations between the quality of information and the attention
processes – described in terms of lifespan and consumption patterns – Mocanu et al.[31]
have conducted a thorough quantitative analysis on users' attention patterns with respect
to different topics coming from distinct sources as alternative news, mainstream media
and political activism. They have discovered that the social response is not affected by
the topic nor by the quality of information and that attention patterns towards unsub-
stantiated claims (defined as controversial information lacking supporting evidence and
contradictory of the official news as conspiracy theories, link between vaccines and
autism etc), towards political activism and regular news were similar despite the dif-
ferent qualitative nature of information. These attention patterns are certainly worth to
be further detailed through empirically grounded research. However, the mere presence
of regularities, beyond differences in topics and information quality, seem to confirm
that attention in social networking sites cannot be understood uniquely as a property of
human cognition or/and social influence.
   Attention is rather becoming a complex process within which the constitutive and
personal act of selecting information for further mental process is increasingly rooted
and constrained by the medium itself and more specifically by the so-called *technicity*,
intended as the "co-constitutive milieu of relations between the human and their techni-

---

[28] Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 46.
[29] R.A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
[30] See for instance: D. Romero, W. Galuba, S. Asur, B. Huberman, "Influence and Passivity in Social
Media", *Machine Learning and Knowledge Discovery in Databases*, 2011: 18-33; S. Goel, D. Watts, D.
Goldstein, "The Structure of Online Diffusion Networks", in *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Conference on
Electronic Commerce*, 2012: 623-638; P.A. Dow, L. Adamic, A. Friggeri, "The Anatomy of Large Facebook
Cascades", in *Proceedings of the Seventh International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, edited
by E. Kiciman, N. Ellison, B. Hogan, P. Resnick, I. Soboroff, The AAAI Press, 2013: 145-154.
[31] D. Mocanu, L. Rossi. Q. Zhang, M. Karsai, W. Quattrociocchi, "Collective Attention in the Age of
(Mis) Information", *Computer Human Behaviour*, 51 (2015): 1198-1204.

cal supports"[32]. According to Thayne the techno-social milieu involved in the formation and capturing of attention in social networking sites has marked a "a shift from harnessing the *eyeballs* of media audiences towards the algorithmic sorting, channeling and organisation of social engagements and user-generated content"[33].

The two main pillars of the infrastructure on which Facebook rely to create, capture and process attention, are the Open Graph protocol and the EdgeRank algorithm. Open Graph is a protocol that works in combination with an application programming interface (API) and social plug-ins (including the Like and Share buttons) and consists of a topological structure involving nodes (made of individual users, events, books, songs, movies, celebrities, etc.), and edges (connections in form of likes/share/comment/friendship among the nodes)[34]. The recording of data traffic offers the basis for managing attention through the selection of the types of content that are included in the News Feeds. This last function is enacted by the EdgeRank algorithm, which acts as a gatekeeper responsible for the selection and ranking of the information that are shown on News Feeds (Bucher, 2012a, 2012b). EdgeRank establishes the degree of visibility that is assigned to each of the edge constantly created by users according to three factors: affinity, intended as the frequency of contact between users; weight, which depends on whether the edge consists of a like, a comment or a visual content; time decay, which is referred to the age of the edge.

As Zietwitz recently suggested[35], a consistent number of talks on algorithms have often fallen into the temptation of interpreting their "powerful yet inscrutable" role in the constitution of social fabric in light of a "seductive drama" which bears some resemblances to long-standing mythologies about the origins of social order. When exposed to careful empirical analysis[36], not only the narrative of deceitful powerfulness algorithms reveals its mythological traits, but also the same algorithms appear to be "less sovereign than mundane […], that is deeply rooted in the fabric of society"[37]. Insofar as the very condition of possibility of algorithms is that they unfold in a state of incessant negotiation and in-betweenness with both human actors and technological tools (users, creators, machines, codes, protocols)[38] the kind of agency they embody can be best described as fractal, as producing numerous outputs from multiple inputs[39]. The Foucauldian concept of governmentality is widely used[40] to describe the capacity of algorithms

[32] P. Crogan, H. Kennedy, "Technologies between Games and Culture", *Games and Culture*, 4, 2 (2009): 107-114 (109), quoted in T. Bucher, "A Technicity of Attention: How Software 'Makes Sense", *Culture Machine*, 13 (2012): 1-23 (4).

[33] M. Thayne, "Friends Like Mine: The Production of Socialised Subjectivity in the Attention Economy", *Culture Machine*, 13 (2012): 1-23 (3).

[34] An updated version of Open Graph is the GraphRank, a new algorithm that is responsible for managing user interaction with applications. It allows users to share the fact that they are listening to music or reading an article, instead of simply sharing something they like, while measuring and finding all the interesting patterns that emerge from the uses of the apps.

[35] M. Zietwitz, "Governing Algorithms: Myth, Mess and Methods", *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 4, 1 (2016): 3-16.

[36] For empirically grounded contributions, see the special issues "Governing Algorithms", *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 41, 1 (2016), edited by M. Zietwitz and "The Social Power of Algorithms", *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 1 (2017), edited by D. Beer.

[37] F. Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture. The Whole Earth Catalogue and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

[38] R. Kitchin, M. Dodge, *Code/Space. Software and Everyday Life*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

[39] L.D. Introna, "Algorithms, Governance and Governmentality: On Governing Academic Writing", *Science, Technology & Human Value*s, 41, 1 (2016): 17-49 (24).

[40] T. Bucher, "Want To Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook", *New Media & Society*, 14, 7 (2012): 1164-1180; Introna, *Algorithms, Governance and Governmentality*.

to organize some aspects of the social world in terms of a relational force which acts not in isolation but rather with the cooperation of those same subjectivities and fields of knowledge that it actively constitutes. There is a wide consensus that the social domain where algorithms exert their most relevant governmental capacity is that of gatekeeping[41], that is the mechanism of sorting, assigning value and regulating visibility of pretty much everything cultural: "it is about the visibility of culture, and of particular forms of culture that algorithmically finds it audience. These systems shape cultural encounters and cultural landscape"[42]. This happens essentially because the algorithmic and proto-cological infrastructure of Facebook has the capacity to enable, shape and instantiate specific modes of attention, in conjunction with its users. According to Bucher[43], these modes have to do with *anticipation* and *personalization*. A basic orientation to future is inscribed in the management of attention proposed by Facebook, which is "not just anticipatory, in prompting participation, but rather a form of self-perpetuating anticipatory action that seeks to realise its own future"[44]. The user generated data are used by Facebook to identify those patterns and predictions about user's future interests and activities on whose basis personalized advertising and recommendation will be produced. What is important for Facebook is the aggregate of individual actions, because only from repetition and difference it will be possible to isolate those patterns that allow for predictability. Once patterns are found, they are used to inform the rationale of News Feed within a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy where users receive more of what they have already paid attention to. The possibility of being exposed to different points of views is therefore sacrificed by a peculiar economy of attention where the present is capitalized in order to create value from the future, from any social activities that are not yet but can potentially become[45].

Personalisation of attention comes as a paradox for a platform that promises to connect people around the world. Indeed, both EdgeRank and Graph Rank are tied to the single user and oriented towards the creation of a personalised data repertoires, tailored specifically to the likes and tastes of individual users. Bucher[46] underlines as this economy of attention radically excludes any idea of public, thought in terms of a collective identity or shared endeavor. The idea of public isn't there, nor in the logic of *users like you* (as it happens for instance in Amazon where user identity is based on how many other people have paid attention to the same book), neither in the form of *public attention* that regulates authority of links in search engines.

This could be seen as an incongruity for a social networking site that since the beginning has been introduced as the pioneer of the *social web* where, in contrast to the informational web, links are based on connections between people. But the paradox is only apparent insofar as the core business of Facebook, the so-called "like-economy", exactly consists in the "extensification" of the social, that is on the channeling of social dynamics and affective interpersonal responses into technicity based and countable

---

[41] E. Hargittai, "Open Portals or Closed Gates? Channeling Content on the World Wide Web", *Poetics*, 27, 4 (2000): 233-253; T. Gillespie, "#trendingistrending: When Algorithms Become Culture", in *Algorithmic Cultures. Essays on Meaning, Performance and New Technologies*, edited by R. Seyfert and J. Roberge, New York: Routledge, 2016, 52-75.

[42] D. Beer, *Popular Culture and New Media*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 97.

[43] Bucher, *Technicity of Attention*.

[44] *Ibid.*, 13.

[45] C. Gerlitz, A. Helmond, 'Hit, Link, Like and Share. Organizing the Social and the Fabric of the Web in a Like Economy'. Paper presented at the DMI mini-conference, Amsterdam 2011, accessed 26 April 2017, https://research.gold.ac.uk/7075/1/GerlitzHelmond-HitLinkLikeShare.pdf.

[46] Bucher, *Technicity of Attention*.

activities such as liking, sharing and commenting[47]. The personalised attention instantiated by Facebook infrastructure therefore works, on the one hand, by dismissing any public dimension, and on the other hand, by enabling a new sociality that Gerlitz and Halmond[48] call the "informational social" as it is concerned with the validation of information through personal networks and the "wisdom of friends". When turning the social into information, Facebook not only makes the social more predictable and manageable[49] but also brings it to collapsing "with the traceable as the still intensive, non-measurable, non visible social is of no value for the company"[50]. In fact, the management of visibility by EdgeRank shows that what is worth of attention is not spectatorship but rather the amount and the kind of user participation.

These modes of attention shape the conditions of possibility for knowledge to emerge, circulate, being validated, discussed or disregarded within social networking sites. We have seen that technicity of attention on Facebook is inherently conservative. In the like-economy, value is produced on the predictability of future social activities and the challenge is to shape the future on the basis of patterns of difference and repetition that are found in the present. In this context, innovation is not rewarded and less-standardized actions of commenting and connecting risk to succumb to the threat of invisibility.

Moreover, it has been shown that attention is measured in terms not of spectatorship, rather of participation, which in turn is registered both in its intentional or active form (as in explicitly clicking a "Like" button), and through users' passively-created activity data. It then results that any voice that aspires to exceed the threshold of visibility should multiply its social activities (liking, sharing, commenting, using social applications), thus complying with the compulsion to participate in a platform where the social is constantly geared to collapse into the traceable. The alternative is to fall into a new *spiral of silence*, where marginalization is not dependent on what is said, rather on how often it is said.

Finally, the value attributed to information hinges on affinity among friends. This means that news are considered as worth of showing only if they come from frequently contacted friends. Relevance comes thus to be framed not as authority engendered by some kind of public attention, rather as popularity uniquely rooted in the circumscribed social circle of frequently contacted users.

Conservativeness, compulsion to participate and popularity have thus emerged as the main mechanisms that drive the social sorting enacted by the algorithmic infrastructure of Facebook. By highlighting them, we have intended to trace some of the main trends that shape the knowledge ecosystem within which fake-news proliferate nowadays. The anthropological entrenchment of algorithms[51], that is their constitutive entanglement with their creators and users, prevents us to establish any direct relationship between the role they play in cultural gatekeeping and the emergence of fake-news. Wide empirical analyses are needed in order to investigate how the priority that is given to content that are predictable, frequent and popular, concretely interact with specific community of practices, pre-existent parameters of authority and of knowledge legitimacy. For the moment, we can only observe that the peculiar management of attention that is

[47] Gerlitz, Helmond, *Hit, Link, Like and Share*, 21.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] Van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*.
[50] Gerlitz, Helmond, *Hit, Link, Like and Share*, 21.
[51] Roberge, Seyfert, "What Are Algorithmic Cultures?".

enhanced by Facebook introduces in the circuit of knowledge both a form of inertia and new bottlenecks that are not in tune with the radical openness towards the unexpected, the endless discussion and the freedom from the constraints of social trends, that are required by any search of the truth. The issue is not whether the information environment of Facebook fosters fake-news, rather whether it offers any bulwark to their strengthening and propagation. We will see in next paragraph how these shortcomings have been implicitly recognized also by Zuckerberg through his public commitment towards the construction of a "safe", "informed" and "civically engaged" global community.

4. TOWARDS A SAFE (AND AUTOMATED) COMMUNITY

In addition to being an excellent subject for analysis of the transformation of the information market, Facebook is a concrete example of a specific platform strategy in relation to the circulation of news. As noted by Meikle[52], Facebook's statements give us an insight into the evolution of the platform, as well as the strategic thinking of its founder Mark Zuckerberg. Zuckerberg himself has recently taken a stand on the subject, and we will now undertake a detailed analysis of this document.

In April 2017, FB launched a campaign to raise awareness about fake news[53], and joined other companies in plans for fact checking and certifying online news.

Already on 16 February 2017, Mark Zuckerberg had posted an interesting statement about *Building a Global Community on Facebook*, which we believe merits close attention, as it focuses on the specific role of a platform like Facebook in the information system.

The post opens with the remark that

> for the past decade, Facebook has focused on connecting friends and families. With that foundation, our next focus will be developing the social infrastructure for community – for supporting us, for keeping us safe, for informing us, for civic engagement, and for inclusion of all.

It appears interesting that, in his post, Zuckerberg intends to create a watershed between the foundation phase, where the platform was focused on connecting friends and families, and the new challenge, made up of five social tasks (helping communities to be supportive, safe, informed, civically engaged and inclusive), the third of which has a direct relevance to information: "help people build an informed community that exposes us to new ideas and builds common understanding in a world where every person has a voice".

In the continuation of the post, this point is developed along two lines. The first (related to the task of creating safe communities) is how to build useful information, especially in particularly critical circumstances, where the support of the platform can take three forms:

> To prevent harm, we can build social infrastructure to help our community identify problems before they happen […]. To help during a crisis, we've built infrastructure like Safety Check so we can all let our friends know we're safe and check on friends who might be affected by an attack or natural disaster […]. To rebuild after a crisis, we've built the world's largest social infrastructure for collective action.

---

[52] G. Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*, London: New York: Routledge, 2016.
[53] Accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/15/facebook-flag-fake-news-fact-check.

In this case, the information he refers to is not necessarily news, but can rather be iden-
tified with the institutional task of informing citizens, which in many countries is car-
ried out by public authorities. This is a salient point of Facebook's philosophy: namely
substitution or subsidiarity in relation to public institutions, in accordance with the do-
it-yourself logic that has led to the development of all digital technology-related innova-
tions, especially network technologies[54]. Zuckerberg immediately clarifies the strategy
of improvement in this respect

> artificial intelligence can help provide a better approach. We are researching systems that
> can look at photos and videos to flag content our team should review. This is still very early
> in development, but we have started to have it look at some content, and it already generates
> about one-third of all reports to the team that reviews content for our community. It will
> take many years to fully develop these systems. Right now, we're starting to explore ways
> to use AI to tell the difference between news stories about terrorism and actual terrorist pro-
> paganda so we can quickly remove anyone trying to use our services to recruit for a terrorist
> organization.

Here it is clear that Facebook's approach is based on AI, and more generally what we
might call knowledge automation, in continuity with the discovery of the algorithms
that underpin all Web 2.0 platforms. The functionality of algorithms lies in their speed
and ability to process otherwise unmanageable data, and it seems obvious to Zucker-
berg that this is the only viable path. What is far from clear is whether this is intended
just for Facebook or, more generally, as the only acceptable solution to the problem.
Correlated with the previous point (substitution of – or integration with – the activity of
institutions by the Facebook community), this automation seems to prefigure a collec-
tive do-it-yourself, based on the strength of the sharing community and the algorithmic
computing power.

Below, with regard to the informed community, the post focuses on the two con-
cerns regarded as most relevant and important that

> this past year were about *diversity of viewpoints we see* (*filter bubbles*) and *accuracy of
> information* (*fake news*)[55]. I worry about these and we have studied them extensively, but I
> also worry there are even more powerful effects we must mitigate around sensationalism and
> polarization leading to a loss of common understanding.

Zuckerberg observes, with regard to the plurality of views

> compared with getting our news from the same two or three TV networks or reading the
> same newspapers with their consistent editorial views, our networks on Facebook show us
> more diverse content.

But what is most interesting here is the attention to the accuracy of information. Zuck-
erberg notes:

> We are proceeding carefully because there is not always a clear line between hoaxes, satire
> and opinion. In a free society, it's important that people have the power to share their opin-
> ion, even if others think they're wrong. Our approach will focus less on banning misinfor-

---

[54] F. Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture. The Whole Earth Catalogue and the Rise of Digital
Utopianism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
[55] Our emphasis.

mation, and more on surfacing additional perspectives and information, including that fact checkers dispute an item's accuracy.

In this sentence we notice many interesting things from our point of view. The first is the insistence on sharing as a value. Various observers[56] have pointed out that the term "sharing" on Facebook has at least two overlapping meanings: adding to the common store and selling. In a perspective such as this, it is obvious that *sharing* value has to be defended at all costs, because, as Zuckerberg writes

> Social media is a short-form medium where many messages are amplified many times.This rewards simplicity and discourages nuance. At its best, this focuses messages and exposes people to different idea.

It remains true, in any case, according to the founder of Facebook, that the strength of sharing is a value, and even polarisation produces positive effects, such as the pluralism of opinions expressed. We can point out here that the pluralism Zuckerberg speaks of has nothing to do with the battle of opinions in some conceptions of the public sphere, starting from its theorist, Habermas[57]. That refers to an initial diversity that – through discussion – leads to a better winnowing of opinions. In this case, more simply, the reference is to a marketplace of information where the consumer has the inalienable right to have the greatest choice among possible opinions.

However, it remains true even for Zuckerberg, that such a process (resonant messages amplified many times) entails risks:

> at its worst, it oversimplifies important topics and pushes us towards extremes. If this continues and we lose common understanding, then even if we eliminated all misinformation, people would just emphasize different sets of facts to fit their polarized opinions. That's why I'm so worried about sensationalism in media.

So, the dream of Zuckerberg and the other social platforms is to have a free information market, with many legitimate opinions and the extreme ones cut out, for the sake of a better *balance* in the opinions themselves. It has to be said that the argument here is very contradictory, because it seeks to wed some kind of absolute liberalism in news to the need for a corrective. Where should this corrective come from? As is generally known, some economic policies – in contrast with laissez-fair principles – suggest the need for public corrections to market effects. But this is not what Zuckerberg is proposing. Instead he is recommending an "inner" corrective, which acts on the sharing mechanism and is based (again!) on the platform's power of automation:

> we noticed some people share stories based on sensational headlines without ever reading the story. In general, if you become less likely to share a story after reading it, that's a good sign the headline was sensational. If you're more likely to share a story after reading it, that's often a sign of good in-depth content. We recently started reducing sensationalism in News Feed by taking this into account for pieces of content, and going forward signals like this will identify sensational publishers as well. There are many steps like this we have taken and will keep taking to reduce sensationalism and help build a more informed community.

---

[56] Van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*; G. Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*, London: Routledge, 2016.

[57] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989 (ed. or. 1962).

All this should – in Zuckerberg's view – help the traditional news industry, since it

> is also critical to building an informed community. Giving people a voice is not enough without having people dedicated to uncovering new information and analyzing it. There is more we must do to support the news industry to make sure this vital social function is sustainable – from growing local news, to developing formats best suited to mobile devices, to improving the range of business models news organizations rely on.

Of course the idea of Facebook's development assisting the news industry needs to be carefully interpreted. As Adrienne Lafrance observed in The Atlantic "Facebook is building a global newsroom run by robot editors and its own readers"[58]. Such a circumstance hardly favours the traditional news Industry at all. Rather it structurally modifies what we have called the "information market", amplifying some of its sides, above all the automation of newsfeed through the complexity and enhancement of algorithms. This relates to the idea of an overall automation of the system, where algorithmic control gains the upper hand over traditional routines of news building and the specific impact of journalistic professionalism.

5. CONCLUSION: BRINGING SOCIAL PRACTICES BACK IN THE PICTURE

More than of the dawn of a new era of post-truth, the analysis of the new conditions of production, distribution and circulation of fake news we have sketched here seems to talk about the definitive sunset of one of the main techno-utopian myths elaborated in the '90s about the Internet: the myth of disintermediation[59]. What we could observe is in fact a vast process of re-intermediation based on new institutional players, and new technological tools. This shift brings with it new opportunities, but also new and specific problems, of which the massive circulation of fake news is but an evident example. Yet, as we have anticipated in our discussion of intermediating algorithms, there's still a key element missing from the picture we have drawn: a specific focus on the patterns of consumption, attribution of value and meaning, discussion, and sharing of fake news, as part of users' online practices. As a relevant strand of empirical literature on users' consumption of online news[60] and on their engagement with those same news (i.e. sharing) in social media has shown, the act of sharing news (and thus circulating and redistributing them) has a plural and intertwined multiplicity of cultural meanings – ranging from identity construction to the invitation to discussion, from the provocation to the disclosure of systems of values and so on – that goes beyond the purely informative and veridictive face value of their content. A specific focus of the users' practices of engagement with fake news is therefore needed to fully understand the phenomenon of their circulation.

---

[58] Accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/02/the-mark-zuckerberg-manifesto-is-a-blueprint-for-destroying-journalism/517113/.

[59] T. Takseva, *Social Software and the Evolution of User Expertise: Future Trends in Knowledge Creation and Dissemination*, IGI Global, 2012.

[60] M. Madianou, "Living with News: Ethnographies of News Consumption", in *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, edited by S. Allan, New York: Routledge, 2010, 428-438; S. Flaxman, G. Sharad, R. Justin, "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80, 1 (2016): 298-320; V. García-Perdomo, R. Salaverría, D. Kilgo, S. Harlow, "To Share or Not to Share", *Journalism Studies*, 2017: 1-22; A.O. Larsson, "Diversifying Likes", *Journalism Practice*, 2017: 1-18.