

Francesco Biondo / Gevisa La Rocca /
Viviana Trapani (eds.)

Information Disorder

Learning to Recognize Fake News



FAKE
NEWS



PETER LANG

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The Fake News project was developed as a social project to suggest an idea of a plural, open, and dialectical society. One product of social action is public opinion, which directly and indirectly influences policy decisions, including those concerning the control and prospects of social innovation, thus exerting pressure on any kind of democratic regime. Disinformation hinders the free process of public opinion building by using various means to negatively influence public opinion with the effect of widening the chasm between decision-making power and active citizenry, who in turn needs to be properly informed to usefully contribute to achieving publicly shared goals in a transparent manner.

The Editors

Francesco Biondo is an associate professor of Legal Philosophy at the Department of Law, University of Palermo.

Gevisa La Rocca is an associate professor of Sociology of Communication at the Kore University of Enna.

Viviana Trapani is an associate professor of Industrial Design at the University of Palermo and coordinator of the Master's Degree Course in *Design and culture of the territory*.

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Contents

by *Ferdinando Trapani*

Preface	9
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Part I Technology and News on Web

Massimiliano Aliverti

The proposed solution: The fake news algorithm project and verification of results	13
--	----

Angelo Paura

Robot reporters, machine learning and disinformation: How artificial intelligence is revolutionizing journalism	23
---	----

*Simone Avolicino**, *Marianna Di Gregorio**, *Marco Romano**, *Monica Sebillo**, *Giuliana Vitiello**, *Massimiliano Aliverti***, *Ferdinando Trapani**** **

Geofacts: A geo-reliability tool to empower fact-checking	31
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Part II Communication and Society

Gevisa La Rocca

The mediatization of disinformation as a social problem: The role of platforms and digital media ecology	43
--	----

Guido Nicolosi

Collective memory and the challenges of digital journalism	63
--	----

Francesco Pira

Disinformation, emotivism and fake news: Polarising impulses and the breakdown of social bonds. Why the true-to-life can seem true	81
--	----

Part III Justice and Misinformation

Francesco Biondo

The marketplace of ideas and its externalities: Who pays the cost of online fake news? 91

Laura Lorello

Freedom of information and fake news: Is there a right to *good* information? 105

Caterina Scaccianoce

Correctness of judicial information and impartiality of the judge: The distortions of the media criminal trial 117

Stefano Pietropaoli

Extra computationem nulla salus? Considerations on democracy, fake news and blockchain 131

Part IV Information and Misinformation Design

Anna Catania

Packaging and plastic are synonymous with waste: But is that really the case? 147

Serena Del Puglia

Citizen journalism and social innovation: Digital platforms for qualitative implementation of participatory journalism 155

Salvatore Di Dio, Mauro Filippi and Domenico Schillaci

“Fake it ‘til you make it”: The designer playground for crafting prototypes, orchestrating frauds and pushing the ecological transition 165

Cinzia Ferrara and Marcello Costa

The form of written thought 177

Santo Giunta

Natural light in the architectural interior: Fake news on the Caravaggio of Palermo 189

<i>Benedetto Inzerillo</i>	
Environment, information, fake news	199
<i>Francesco Monterosso</i>	
Re-thinking news: Information design and “antibody” contents	207
<i>Ferdinando Trapani</i>	
From the Panopticon to the freedom to communicate in the city space	217
<i>Viviana Trapani</i>	
Fake news: A design-driven approach	227
The authors	235

Ferdinando Trapani

From the Panopticon to the freedom to communicate in the city space

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the possible link existing between space, particularly city space, and disinformation. The examination of some points of transition and change in the structure of technologies and their exploitation by power systems and power games will help identify some of their characteristics, namely control, domination and defence. The urban and territorial spatial dimension is a relational environment produced in various ways by the government practices and policies of a city. Transformations of the city space are set in motion by decision-making power, and these in turn are dependent on public opinion, which can be influenced in various ways by forms of disinformation. Citizens seek to trace the truth of information and therefore demand assurance from decision makers that their communication actions are anchored in reality. The state does not seem to be able to provide these guarantees due to the social transformation brought about by the profound change in communication instruments. In the conclusions, the study stresses the urgency to research into the links between city space and communicative action under conditions in which the phenomena of information distortion are controlled and assessed also with the aid of information technologies implemented to challenge the complexity of the exponential growth of data used as the basis for building public opinion without which no planning effort is possible.

Keywords: Media, urban & regional planning, ideology, public opinion, technologies of power, ICT

Introduction

What is the space discussed in this study? Let us limit ourselves to the city space. The city is understood here in the sense that Edoardo Salzano proposed with the interpretative triplet *urbs*, *civitas* and *polis*: (Salzano, 2008). The starting point is that communication, beginning with Habermas's (1981) theory of communicative action, which has profoundly impacted communicative planning (Forester, 1982, 1988), is what makes a relationship between *urbs*, *civitas* and *polis* possible, and that therefore communicative quality affects the quality of living. When communication is distorted, political communication based on a rational approach to real problems is challenged in any effort to guide social transformation. Information distortion is one of the multidimensional features of power and its false consciousness (Lukes, 1974, 149).

Forester (1982) addressed the issue of power play by considering the contribution of communication and the various phenomena of distortion that characterise the exercise of power. What emerged in the processes of urban transformation, well before the advent of the Web, was that around the communication table rational decision-making is always influenced by a series of more or less intentional disturbances caused by those who wield greater power. Planners should be aware of this by properly preparing themselves by reviewing their work from a communicative perspective. It is not just about changing one's language skills. It is not enough to "translate" the design proposal into "non-technical" language. Planners need to be aware that they will very likely be confronted by some form of antagonistic power capable of exploiting or putting an end to any hypothesis of change if the latter involves high costs and sacrifices for those in decision-making power.

Protecting oneself from disinformation, misinformation and bad information is virtually impossible. The only thing we can do is to prepare for it because as Forester argues, we need to consider the fact that this type of news that does not entirely reflect reality can always be built ad hoc or can be the result of countless other factors that are not voluntary on the part of those who produce it. That is why Forester's advice (1988, p. 47) is to anticipate and work hard to combat communication distortions that undermine democratic planning. Therefore, progressive planning – structurally critical but hardly fatalistic – is both a way to democratise and practically organise a given planning process.

As concerns the intertwining of planning and the power of the media to shape public opinion, it has been noted that psychoanalysis has made a considerable contribution (Gunder, 2011) and that too often planners are left outside the world of information, leaving the field of communicative effectiveness to free market speculation, rendering any possibility of controlling urban transformations useless (Calavita & Krumholz, 2003).

The case of Minister Fiorentino Sullo in Italy is perhaps the most serious and disconcerting case of disinformation that has ever occurred in the history of Italian urban planning and whose nefarious effects are still felt in the disruption of the urban layout of territories in so many parts of the country, ultimately resulting in a real block of new constructions: a sort of cartel of social and business entities and forces linked in various ways to the construction industry (Parlato, 1972). At the height of his political career in the Italian Christian Democrats, Sullo, alongside Amintore Fanfani, was the target between 1960 and 1964 of a violent smear campaign in the press claiming that he was a gay person (Lanzetta, 2015; Macchioni, 2021). By wiping out Sullo's political reputation with the disinformation and defamation campaign, the only attempt at Italian urban reform

fizzled away, as did that at agrarian reform (Sullo, 1964; Becchi, 1997; Salzano, 1998, pp. 119–123).

In the “Sullo affair” disinformation was served through the newspapers¹. The former minister was never given a chance to reply to the allegations.

Political technologies for control in space: The gaze

In the late eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham (1780) believed that the whole new society cleansed of the experience of the French Revolution in the perspective of a utilitarian philosophy of which he was probably the leading representative paved the way for the entry of happiness as the motive and end of individuals and contributed significantly to the development of liberalism (Abbagnano, 1971). In this regard, this marks the birth of the conception of the state as human behavioural analyst, and that it is only through this ability that the proper punishment can be accurately determined. Knowing is everything, and dedicated technological devices are needed to pursue it. The panopticon was a proposed technology of power based on the alleged effectiveness of the gaze (control) of inspection no one, not even the controller, could escape from. The controlling gaze is everything. This is a new light that allows human behaviours to be treated solely in the perspective of their ends and the intensity of the motivations behind them. Desire, pleasure, and individual happiness that cannot be distinguished from collective happiness is a social project that attempts to address the issue of the great multitude versus the possibilities for the few who run government to understand, direct, and guide the masses. These tasks are all impossible without the use of the machine, which, while bearing in mind the differences with the human brain, presents a mode of organisation not entirely different from that of mathematics (von Neumann, 1958).

Yet, despite criticism, Bentham’s thought still pervades the world of law and especially economics. Foucault’s reflection and focus on the panopticon as a diabolical machine (Foucault, 1983) has played a decisive role in developments in economic studies in which the self-balancing character of social and economic organisations subject to types of high-level planning control has been considered (McKinlay Starkey, 1998).

1 In April 1963, a violent press campaign was unleashed against the Italian Minister of Public Works Fiorentino Sullo: The newspaper “il Tempo” and “il Popolo” (the official newspaper of the Christian Democratic party) on April 13th, announced announced that the party distanced itself from the actions of its minister.

Journalism was born at the same time as the panopticon. From the utilitarian and individualistic politics of looking to listening over time, the technology of power moves from the architectural space of the city (of new types of buildings designed for the new society to be controlled and possibly corrected) to the social relational environment.

Between gazing into physical space and listening to words on the Web there is also the video media that maintains the controlling potential of power technologies over time (Adorno, 1957). The debate on the relationship between the masses and communication technologies has developed so much that, in the early 1960s, it led to a fundamental reflection on the role of the medium as an element to be considered per se to assess the social value of communication more than the content of the message: it is not the content that shapes society but the nature of the medium (McLuhan, 1964). Baudrillard (1995) seems to take up the same concept but stretches the argument to the point of considering the likelihood that the medium's ability to transform society goes so far as to *kill reality*. The continuous mirroring of reality with its representation (television, but a fortiori it could also apply to social media today) causes the medium to dissolve into reality and reality to dissolve in turn into the medium.

The advent of information technology and social change

Today we have network information technologies that shape the way opinion is formed and journalism is developed.

Manuel Castells (2001) set out the constitutive principles of the internet as a culture from its original creators (defence and software producers).

Taking a step back from the advent of the internet in the late 1990s, Chomsky stigmatized the power of the media vis-à-vis the instrumental use of political propaganda: this changes the way democracy is understood (Chomsky, 1994).

For Castells (1997), the intertwining of politics and the Web in the late 1990s could be considered informational politics, in the sense that politicians, in search of electoral consensus, turned their communication activity from the physical city (election posters) to the traditional media, also coming to use the internet, though in a less massive way (Castells, 2001).

In Italy, it is worth mentioning the phenomenon of the 5 Star Movement (M5S), a political party that upon its appearance on the Italian political scene in 2009 operated almost exclusively online, becoming the second largest national party in a very short time. Unlike traditional political parties, M5S operated almost exclusively online, with no non-digital venues or forms of communication. Incredibly, for many years candidates were forbidden from giving

interviews on TV or to the press (Musso, Maccaferri, 2018; Pirro, 2018). For M5S, propaganda and even the entire communication flow of the movement's members took place mainly through a dedicated online platform reserved only for members for important internal motions. For the M5S, the world of the Web was almost exclusive to the extent that it constituted one of the main challenges for the movement in the effort to renew the entire national political system. The movement has sought to combine three different challenges to representative democracy: a *reformist challenge* (by strengthening a set of direct democracy tools, such as referendums, within an institutional framework that remains centred on the Parliament), a *utopian challenge* (the complete transcendence of representative democracy *through the massive use of ICT tools*), and a *plebiscitary challenge, which is expressed through a top-down approach to the Web* (Floridia & Vignati, 2014).

Another example of a possible link between politics, the city and disinformation well worth a closer look is the phenomenon of the so-called "Bestia" (Beast) related to the rapid rise of Matteo Salvini's League, which has often been described in almost legendary terms: a sort of optimum for the technology of power applied to the quest for electoral consensus through a cynical and reckless use of public opinion fuelled both by political information professionals and the sentiments of social media users (Gabanelli & Ravizza, 2019). The potential of Web data analysis tools is often attributed an *automatic* ability to respond to the expectations of potential voters even while taking for granted the production of disinformation generated by dedicated algorithms, when it would be more appropriate instead to first assess the skill of political analysts who know how to use these technological innovations appropriately (Rociola, 2018).

It is difficult to *attribute to the machine the ability to change the course of political action* but, in fact, it is quite reasonable to acknowledge that *machines provide new energies to the ways political communication is exercised in the terms of the decisive enhancement of the technologies of power*. This should be considered in order to analyse and understand the relationship between power games and governance of the transformations of the space of cities and territories in which voters are mere passive spectators of the *king's-makers'* skill (Mazzoleni, 1997).

Referring to the literature in the field of urban planning, the use of the Web is a relatively new thing on an established basis in the field of urban policy. The upheaval of the party power structure over social consensus driven primarily by values can be traced back to the actualisation of the many efforts made to get rid of parties understood as distancers/obstacles between active citizenship and innovative transformation policies for the city/polis (Olivetti, 1949) and for territorial governance (Magnaghi, 2000).

The Benthamian contraption of the Panopticon is a box that constitutes a mode of representation of the world in which every point of the territory can be controlled, giving the feeling that every imperfection and deviation from social normalcy can be corrected. It is not difficult to find similarities and affinities between Bentham's diabolical contraption and the potential function of controlling social behaviour across the planet as theorised in the conception of a new surveillance with information technology (Marx, 1985). Moreover, this new surveillance "can contribute to political pluralism, which is crucial for democracy, by making surveillance tools widely available so that citizens and competing groups can use them against each other, as well as the government, to increase accountability" (Marx, 2002, p. 22).

Conclusions

Although power games go to any lengths to manipulate the perception of reality, users' search for it is irrepressible and sooner or later becomes unstoppable. As a social communication problem, democratic power needs to be able to establish in the flow of controlled information at least a situation of balance between those who speak and those who listen, between those who attack and accuse and those who are affected by fake news. As McLuhan (1964, pp. 21–22) recalled,

Pope Pius XII was deeply concerned that there be serious study of the media today. On February 17, 1950, he said: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual's own reaction".

The communication McLuhan refers to was predominantly unidirectional, but there are still aspects of imbalance between speaker and receiver even in the case of "surveillance slack" (Marx, 2002), that is, granting everyone a high communication technology capacity. Power technologies control people under the guise of granting/acquiring increasingly greater freedom to communicate. It is a characteristic of the medium to drive everyone into submission through the seduction of representation as an absolute mirror of reality (Baudrillard, 1979). However, it is one thing to have the freedom to communicate, in which the seduction of the medium is present, and quite another to infringe on the freedom of others to be, to live, and to share a relationship with the community. The possibility that continued denial of communication only generates social unease, alienation, a sense of exclusion and indifference in participation in public action, as well as hatred, anger and violence (Baudrillard, 1995).

At this point, it should be noted that in thinking about effective urban planning, urban taxation in relation to urban social welfare, i.e., the public city,

becomes the point where the actual feasibility of the transformation of the physical city's space and the drive of the values of the players of this transformation come together (Camagni, 2008; Ferri, 2015).

In technical urban planning, which deals mainly with land and cadastral value, it is very difficult for a problem such as fake news to exist. Yet, the public city and urban welfare exist if there is an urban need that is formed through debate over major choices of location, which, in turn, depend on the political actions of those who, through consensus, achieve and hold decision-making power. So, in urban planning, the phenomenon of fake news is indirect but exists in a subordinate way. The reason is, as mentioned above, that it is only in the relationship between *polis* and *civitas* that the negative influence of fake news manifests itself directly, but it is reasonable to assume that if planning is indebted to the theory of communicative action and hence communication is the subject of disinformation, misinformation or bad-information, planning too is negatively affected. In the future, critical analysts called to assess planning decisions in recent years will have to determine the quality of the communicative action around major choices (the way the decision was made to demolish the bridge in Genoa or the heated debate over the tramlines or the new headquarters of the Sicily Region in Palermo, the new stadium in Rome, etc.). Keeping in mind how much public opinion has affected major urban planning choices is very important in guiding urban planning since any infrastructure affects the value of land and its trend over time.

Without secure or at least reliable communication, the project of the public city is left at the stake because fake news disorients both the decision (*polis*) and the consensus of the citizenry (*civitas*) and, as a result, the quality of inhabiting the city space in terms of territorial extension (*urbs*) is no longer a goal that can be attained without some of the actors of urban transformation benefiting for themselves at the expense of others.

Ultimately, I believe that the search for disinformation, if anchored in shared and open ethical principles of social utility control, with the help of highly innovative technologies, can become an opportunity for profound change: from *defence against power technologies* to an *instrument to be used in learning processes*.

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