Beyond Fake News and Fact-Checking: A Special Issue to Understand the Political, Social and Technological Consequences of the Battle against Misinformation and Disinformation

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Disinformation, hoaxes and false news are part of our daily lives and have numerous antecedents throughout history, and there have been many authors who have described the parallel between communication theories and propaganda theories (Barredo Ibáñez 2021).

The history of humanity has shown us that speculation, gossip and rumors have always existed in society. From Ancient Egypt, when, in 1279 BC, the pharaoh Ramses II falsely engraved in stone his alleged victory over the Hittites in the current Syrian territory; to the well-known tale of H.G. Wells, transmitted on the radio on 30 October 1938, with news about an alleged Martian invasion on Earth; or Goebbel's sentence, the Nazi propaganda minister: "a lie told a thousand times turns into truth" (Rúas-Araújo et al. 2020).

The difference, therefore, between the disinformation that has been spread in the first quarter of the 21st century and that which was distributed in past centuries lies in the involvement of the audiences as active subjects—so-called media "prosumers," consumers and at the same time content generators. Users, empowered by technology, contribute to misinformation and become opinion leaders in their communities of friends, family and colleagues. Users inform others through WhatsApp groups or their Facebook status, tweets or videos on TikTok. Or, usually unintentionally, they misinform them. The other new variables relevant to disinformation's spread in the present era are the speed and scale of technologies, which often favor content with highly emotional or sensational characteristics; under these conditions, lies often beat out the truth (Vosoughi et al. 2018.)

Disinformation therefore transcends digital media. Rumors and fake news have become commonplace in digital media, making it very difficult to disseminate compensatory information at a similar rate. This is yet another consequence of the growing popularization of computation, automation and algorithmic segmentation. These phenomena influence the production and life cycle of news within the so-called attention economy, compromising citizens' ability to form free and informed opinions.

The number of people who mistake false news for that which is veracious during election time is on the rise. Also becoming more prevalent are the social and governmental concerns regarding fake news and its harmful effects on public opinion, as well as on institutional trust and the quality of democracy, as external interference and toxic content impinge upon the electoral processes of various countries. In this sense, the task of fact-based journalism stands as the cornerstone for social accountability. It is a defining feature of the nature of a society's trust in governments and institutions, as well as citizens' rights.

Such a situation makes it all the more important that journalists themselves are rigorous in their approach to this bewildering and confusing information environment (Patterson 2013; Wihbey 2019).

Following a rigorous selection process, in this Special Issue, we present eight papers, which explore many perspectives on the battle against misinformation and disinformation. The articles presented are related to the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and this determines the forms of production and reception of content since its inception.

In fact, the unprecedented health, social, economic and political impact of this pandemic has multiplied misinformation to the point that, in February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the spread of two types of epidemics: one caused by the outbreak of the coronavirus and another by the proliferation and scope of information about this infection. For the latter, the WHO used the term "infodemic", which refers, among other things, to the overabundance of information, both accurate and false, which makes it difficult for people to find reliable sources and guidance when they need it.

This context—the increase in misinformation that affects people's health and democracy itself—frames the different papers included in this monograph.

This is how, for example, the way in which journalistic organizations are eliminating the features of user comments is studied. Paradoxically, although media platforms have more interactive options than ever, civil participation is limited to try to establish a more rigorous discourse from a social point of view.

In other words, verification is imposed as a new model of editorial management of the media but also of social networks. From this angle, one of the studies in the issue proposes a review of the verification mechanisms of the CIRCOM Network, a European network of regional television stations.

Equally, however, news media are looking for some editorial alternatives to capture the attention of new audiences and reposition themselves in public debate. Thus, gamification arises as an alternative to the traditional editorial lines of the media; these are closer to the narratives of social networks, as pointed out in one of the works collected in this issue.

The selected articles also have a markedly international character, studying cases such as the crowdsourcing strategies used by journalists in Greece; the transformations of journalists in the United States, in addition to analyzing, in another of the works, the effects and influence of populism in the last presidential elections held in this country; the treatment of women in the press in Spain, France and the United Kingdom; and the characterization of memes as political communication strategies in the United States and Ecuador.

Disinformation is not only damaging to people's individual lives, health and finances but to democracy as a whole. The crisis that originated from the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled the debate on the public need to protect ourselves against the spread of unfounded rumors and false news. And, as seen in the different perspectives collected in this Special Issue, against a backdrop of tension and collective fear, these factors can seriously erode our social stability, peaceful coexistence and the foundations on which Western democracies are built.

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