

#INCEPTION –
**INTERCULTURAL STUDIES: BRIDGING THE GAP
BETWEEN NATIONS THROUGH COMMUNICATION**

WHEN TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA MEET COVID-19. RELATIVIZATION OF THE TRUTH AND THE FATE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract:

Technology has been embraced by the human kind very quickly, including social media, but studies on the impact of technology and social media on the human being and the society have never been achieved. Some side effects have been considered vulnerabilities and used for information warfare, using fake news and disinformation. When the Covid-19 pandemic exploded, in March, 2020, the combined impact of the two did create a real perfect storm, with important consequences for the international relations, global security but also for the intelligence activities in times of crisis.

Keywords: *Fake news, information warfare, disinformation, relativization of truth, post truth, post-factual, post sensorial.*

Feelings, emotions, beliefs: shading the rational thinking

There is an abundance of questions, I named them **the Whys**, which are just telling us how little we still know about **the impact of technology, information war, fake news** on our minds, on our behaviour, on our day-to-day life. There are no strict and complete answers, but the Whys are opening avenues for research. And some hints we already possess and some studies are already on the way. The impact of technology and social media as well as the impact of the pandemic are of tremendous importance – even though the studies refer just to the first wave from March-June 2020 – on the human being, the society, the political life and democracy. This is not to excuse

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previous societal evolutions and pre-existing rifts inside the democratic societies which cannot be put only on the crises of the last years, but on a whole evolution that has led here.

There is a number of Whys on the table, and some more consequential to our first responses. But we are going to focus on the most obvious ones: Why do we accept fake news (altered information)? Why don't we identify the fake news? Why the explosion of disinformation right now? Which are the mechanisms of our human mind that make us ignore even the obvious, when we know it is not the truth, it is not the factual reality, but it fits our interests and our will? All this reality is also altering the basics of intelligence and we need to pay attention to this evolution, relativization of truth and disinformation 2.0., meaning altering the reality perceived through the very basic human senses.

The reality of this acceptance comes from a lot of processes, but the first and most important one is linked to emotions. Any human being is defined by emotions, and those emotions are like drugs, able to shade away the rationality, to put under anesthesia our critical thinking and to make us believe what we know is not true. On the other hand, yes, there is a lot of information that we don't know is fake, we take it as such and consider it true, even disseminating it, with the credibility that we have in our own circles of "friends" on the Internet.

Dominique Moisi was the one making a chart of the fundamental emotions, using a psychological postulate that any emotion is a composition, in due quantities, of the three fundamental ones - Fear, Humiliation and Hope (Moisi, 2010). Attributing a certain dominant fundamental emotion to a category of people in the world enabled him to solve the most important criticism to Samuel Huntington's book on the Clash of civilizations (Huntington, 2002), about the borders and artificial lines of demarcation of the civilisations. For Moisi, all those emotions could be at the same place, defining different people.

Emotions are the ones able to change our rational behaviour. It is well known, and there is a lot of literature in this direction. Dan Gardner has made an excellent overview of the feelings and their relation with the emotions, the sense of Danger to the Herd that could export emotions to a group, especially Fear, trying to describe the

Chemistry of Fear, and the extreme fear, terror, analysing the context and perspectives of those Terrified of Terrorism (Gardner, 2009). Playing with feelings, creating reactions and using the human minds in order to distort the (assumed) reality – or at least put an emphasis on a needed aspect – could alter dramatically the rational block of the human mind, even at the group level.

Social media plays an important role when it is up to the echo chambers and information bubbles. Emotions are exacerbated via the lack of public space and the gathering of like-minded altogether. The opposite arguments are missing, there is no debate, and we are no longer in a public space, so even democracy is faked. We just have one and the same idea presented with full speed and aimed at prompting the required emotion able to create a general rejection of any argument that doesn't fit our thesis and beliefs. Yes, these emotions and feelings move closer to the religion and the beliefs: they don't need any proofs, evidence, argument, we just Believe in the narrative of the group because we Feel it is right, and it gives sense to our Emotions.

The mechanism is to be analysed thoroughly by psychologists, social-psychologists, sociologists, as well as communication experts to realize how this is possible to act, to obstruct and to transform the rational thinking. We have some ideas already developed. A major error is the one related to the perspective and dimensions of each issue that concerns the society, or even the agenda brought to the attention of the public (by the media, the officials, the social media). If you look at only one thing, it seems to fill all the landscape and to capture the full interest of your view.

This error of perspective can also be speculated by the conspiracy theories that are taking the public agenda labelled as "Official" and try to drag you in an alternative world, in an alternative reality, in the social media groups that are offering a different agenda. But this is not always the "objective" or "independent" one, but covers the needs and interests of different groups, including those of the offensive foreign countries. You have to take the real perspective and approach it in a rational manner, using critical thinking and fact checking, in order to realize who's profiting from your time and attention on a particular issue.

Sometimes, the subject at stake fits into your area of interests or expectations or, even more, the subject touches upon some very intimate emotions and feelings of your own, dragging you in the group and keeping you away, eventually, from the opposite arguments and from the real pragmatic thinking on the issue. And it is not only about the subject that needs to be “sold” convincingly, it also needs to be assessed and addressed in a right way, in a professional approach, in order to attract new followers, new believers.

Can we do everything with the information war (fake news, disinformation, propaganda)?

The big debate is what was first, the egg or the hen? The problems inside our societies speculated and amplified by the information warfare or the information warfare that projected alternative realities on our societies drag out from the mainstream pieces of the societies, groups and followers of those “new religions” based on emotions, feelings and fake news. Once society is exposed and “prepared” with the existence of those groups, once the isolation during a pandemic is pushing more people to the social media and for a longer time, after the social media itself splits the society into pieces and divides the public space, it is easier to forge an information warfare against such a democratic society, taking advantage of the principles and values that it defends, including freedom of speech and free flow of ideas.

Critics are coming from both sides. Presuming that propaganda can do anything in any society is a false axiom. Moreover, if we put the blame for everything that goes wrong in our societies on the information warfare, propaganda, disinformation and fake news, we miss the point. We risk ignoring the real social tensions, divisions and rifts inside our society that we need to address and solve for the health of our societies. Having in hand the information war and fake news, this could make an over-confident government and raise the effectiveness of propaganda if we do not make a correct monitoring and overview of the real problems and concerns of our society.

We know for a fact that perception can replace reality. Once established via a general perception, a “perceived reality” cannot be shaken by any argument. It happens when communication is missing or is badly conducted and the public lacks trust in a leadership on a badly promoted specific issue. It happens in times of crisis when solving the crisis but not communicating with the public can make the decision-maker lose his job. On a different note, the so-call Thomas Theorem tells us that a false fact perceived as real could become real through its consequences. It produces real consequences, even if there is fake news at its origin (Dungaciu, 2017, p. 11-17). As is the case in logics where a false proposition can lead to a true one through rational thinking.

Moreover, the context can create the effectiveness of the false. Pre-existing trust crisis, or credibility crisis in the state and its institutions, in the political leadership or a professional one in a specific discipline, leads to the real crisis from fake news or false premises. The lack of trust and lack of credibility of the official decision-makers creates premises for a larger share of the population to believe and to trust fake news or what people hope, or expect, or believe, or feel. Critical thinking and rational approach are put aside. On the contrary, when a large number of individuals trust in institutions and state, fake news and information warfare lead only to an insignificant number or an irrelevant or non-representative effect (marginal) of the fake news introduced. But what we have discovered is that any lie, the most unbelievable one, always has a public. A tiny, irrelevant, marginal one, but a public nonetheless (Chifu & Nantoi, 2016).

That is how we can build the resilience of society against fake news, propaganda, and disinformation: by good, timely and credible communication with a high level of trust in its representatives, leaders and elected or appointed officials. A leadership expected to be interested in the public’s trust and with concerns and policies that really reflect hopes and expectations, as well as the true capacity of the society to solve those issues. This leads to matching the leadership and the political elite with the natural and professional elite of a society, at least. It could not be enough, especially when the level of expectancy is higher than the one the society could provide or offer.

Fake news cannot change the reality *per se*. But it could definitely influence it, amplify some trends. Fake news could benefit from pre-existing realities, difficulties, rifts and divisions in a society and amplify them, but it cannot change the reality. People and individuals need to trust somebody, to put their trust somewhere. If you do not believe and trust in your society, your political leaders, then you might trust in the source of fake news (including “my friend” from Facebook). The lack of trust in the official narrative creates the avenue for information warfare.

Trust can also come directly from the lack of hope that a government or a leadership as a whole is offering to the society. People need hope so if they don't have any hope coming from the political class of their country, they are inclined to find this hope somewhere else. It is also about fundamental emotions. People will go where somebody offers hope, because they are expecting a different outcome than the gloomy or dark one that can be predicted by the leadership in crisis situations. That's the pandemic case. The need for Hope makes individuals look for alternative narratives, even if there is only fake news, stories or sweet lies.

Vulnerability and the lack of resilience in the face of information warfare come from a low level of trust in institutions, elites, or the national founding myths. This makes a whole society vulnerable to those acts of information warfare, or to disinformation or to foreign propaganda, that stress your disbelief and makes even worth the situation, in a spiral of disbelief. Therefore, we cannot ignore the sociological approach and knowing the real issues of the society that need to be addressed first, then we can deal with the fake news, disinformation and propaganda, the information war unleashed upon our society. It is first a sociological driven issue, before being a communication technique problem.

The Obsession with propaganda could become propaganda in itself. It is filling the space of a rational responsible for crisis, other than the leadership of a country, with the blame on an external factor. Transforming everything in propaganda, blaming that everything is propaganda means not identifying the real propaganda, missing the real information aggression. But this also means avoiding tackling the real

social problems of a society. Nuances are always necessary. So sociology is back on track and desperately needed to support the political leadership. And I mean sociologic qualitative research, not only superficial qualitative questionable polls. A study on the situation of trust, the Whys of the public disbelief in the national leadership, especially the political one, is necessary before beginning the crusade against propaganda and information war.

The nuances and sophistication of Disinformation 2.0

If we are used to discuss fake news, disinformation and propaganda, elements of the information warfare, in a very black and white format - it is either true or false - the Disinformation 2.0 comes with a lot of nuances and a high degree of sophistication. It is no longer easy to prove each of the attributes - true or false - so it is difficult to deal with the fake news of this generation, linked with altering the information coming from senses of the human being. Nuances are as important, because they need far more steps to prove each value. Fake news is neither true, nor false. From completely false to untrue there are 50 shades of grey. The reality is no longer only black and white.

Disinformation 2.0. is a mixture of true and false in different doses. As much as the false part is less perceivable, the story is better constructed and the fake news/disinformation/propaganda (equivalent terms somehow) are more difficult to expose. And it is not only about this in a story, but also about some other ingredients of a subjective substance like observation, impression, feelings, perceptions, opinions of a witness. That leads directly to the post-truth era.

Surely, information war is neither immaculate in scope, nor impeccable in logic, truth and presentation of the facts. So it is not only about the vulnerabilities of the society. It is not innocent and some of the actions influence the environment itself, preparing it to become receptive to the future actions of the information warfare, with a higher rate of impact. It is an aggression on our societies, it takes advantage, like all other components of a hybrid war, on the characteristics of a liberal democracy, on the principles and values that we cherish and defend, including freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

And this comes from creating a complete mess about the truth, as already underlined before. Who owns the truth? Who says what's true? What is the value of knowing what is true and false? Therefore, we are living in times when there is a complete relativization of the truth. The real question now is if: Do you believe me or not? You do not need any argument or reference. Actually, the disinformation 2.0. destroys references, criteria, and arguments. We are placed somewhere between "the truth and false are equal as importance and moral relevance" (Nietzsche) as in the logics, and "the truth is what I am telling you the truth is" (Gobbels).

As a result, fake news becomes completely different than false news. News could be counterfeit, credible, plausible, not only false, in order to be fake. There are nuances. Disinformation 2.0. is a plethora of nuances of grey inside the truth, not the nude false. Propaganda, disinformation, communication errors, moral panics, inuendo, collective hysterias, intoxications, diversions, conspiracies, partisanship, all are parts of the information warfare. They are Old and New. But the means in hand as of today are different. Information, disinformation, persuasion, propaganda are parts of the story with different instruments attached and different values of the truth (Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 133-139).

Fake news is a term present in the 19-th century English vocabulary. The term exploded when it was politicized. Donald Trump played – (an important?) role, by labelling CNN and mainstream media as fake news (hiding information inside a lot of noise), then, in 2018, establishing the prices for fake news!!! Nowadays, the term has been politicized and has a larger area of use than the original concept. Fake news becomes an umbrella term for nearly everything. With the politicization, fake news has become equivalent to hostile approaches of the media that we refuse to acknowledge, interpretations that we disagree with, and points of view that are detrimental to us.

On a different note, there is an important part of society which thinks that Fake news is a motif for censoring the freedom of the media, an opportunity to limit the freedom of expression. And here the fight against fake news needs to pay attention to the perception of the population, and to find genuine and largely accepted motifs for limiting

the freedom of media or of expression. It is the case of hate speech, verbal violence and tarnishing the image of a person.

As we have seen, Fake news is a name/label that could be attributed to everything we disagree with. It is indiscriminately used especially for not identifying the “real” fake news. It becomes an excess through politicization and generalization. A strategy aimed to undermine the credibility, to discredit everything, or at least to question the genuine truth. In the discipline of semiology, we are talking about a pair – signifier and signified – the name or label of a word and its content, substance. A way of building fake news is either to mix them, or to alter the substance of a concept. In the end, all leads to undermining the trust in what is real, obvious, concrete and visible around us. It leads to a perfect relativization of all things.

Everything begins like in a soap opera – stories inside stories that turn apart the hero and the villain, the bad and the good. It is a work of the relativization of good and bad and the story helps make an inter-changeable role. The bad becomes the good and vice versa. And that is the ground for high uncertainty. That is how we begin to build conspiracy theories – stories incredible but needed for being able to shift good into bad and bad into good, or at least to add more nuances into each of the actors so that the result does not distinguish between the hero and the villain. That is how conspiracy theories begin to be acceptable and are even welcomed in such a milieu, used to consume soap operas. Under stress, in times of crisis, it becomes even worse.

Yuval Harari said that *Homo sapiens* is a post-truth species (Harari, 2018). Its survival is dependent on creating and believing in fiction. This is partially true, since sophistication multiplies the nuances of the truth and that of the false and makes it more difficult to deal with fake news. An old phenomenon coupled with new technologies - social media, metadata, algorithms, virtual platforms, artificial intelligence, and research engines – changes society directly. How does this happen? We don't know all the consequences and mechanisms of the impact of social media on society and the individual. But we need to quickly realize where we go from here.

The basic approach of the EU is that Disinformation means intention. I am not very sure that even in this field we can be so drastic.

Disinformation 2.0. can use pieces of intentional information, warfare techniques that are taking advantage of vulnerabilities already created in a society and some parts of disinformation without intention (or mal-information, as it is labelled). Even the side effects of political campaigns or electoral ones in a society can create good grounds to emphasize the vulnerabilities of a society or the fractures in the societal cohesion and allow an intentional disinformation 2.0 campaign to be much more effective when needed, in an information war that is not always linked to a conflict or physical war.

And this is not without consequences. As Condoleezza Rice put it, the political risk comes from everyone with a cell phone/photo camera/social media profile. It is a new type of media channel, better fitted to exploit any story with an ideological component or political issue inside (Rice & Zegart, 2018). Since business is close to politics once more after the change of geopolitics, after the Cold War, and people have enough knowledge and numerous precedents, it is easy to transform everything into politics and shake the government.

It is not really like that: politics embraced the agenda of the NGOs first and moved all issues to the political stage, politicizing the agenda and democratizing the society as a whole. But not all the pieces of this agenda are interesting to the population, in their politicized form. Then, a government could not be shaken by practically everything, if it is not in the immediate attention and does not fill a need or an expectation of the public. In other words, we need to have at least the context prepared and the trust in the leadership shaken before moving to action. If not, the impact would be meaningless, as reported before. But the fact is that megatrends in politics, business and technology did transform political risk, making it more diverse, pervasive and consequential (Rice & Zegart, 2018, p. 10).

Complementary issues and research avenues for contemporary information warfare

Information war/warfare leads us to some other complementary issues that need to obtain suitable and comprehensive answers in order to help the research and make sense of the issue. There is a lot to do in

an interdisciplinary approach and the difficulty relies on those matters. That is why we also seek to present some parts of the reality where there are no answers or the research level is still incipient, with no convincing results in place.

A first area of research is the one related to fake news, false news, deep fake. This relies on the capacity of our senses to determine and establish the truth, the realities and facts. When the senses create fake news, we have a big problem. Especially when it is about our view which gives us more than 80% of the information. We saw images that prove not to be true, to be misleading and to create fake news. When we can no longer rely on our natural senses, as humans, we have a level of relativisation of the information coming from our natural senses that is no longer acceptable, and a big part of humanity can no longer cope with this level of relativisation.

The Coronavirus and the sense of danger have already been evoked here. To what extent there is fear and terror when thinking about the Coronavirus, it is difficult to realise today. Sociology could help us understand where distrust related to the Coronavirus pandemic comes from in our societies. If the level of impact of the illness on the human being is less important or perceived as comparable to the normal mortality in the human society, we could be used to accept it and reject inconvenient measures taken by our officials in order to cope with this crisis. It is similar to death during war times or death from traffic accidents: even if the impact is high, nobody refrains from driving.

Another part of the needed research belongs to Rhetoric. It is a science that has been marginalised or forgotten. The great speeches of our time are full of content and creative wording that cross the years and eras, and are still quoted. Now, populism needs to be addressed both from the charismatic angle of the personalities and from the rhetoric point of view and the natural abilities to make great speeches at any moment.

Communicating feelings and emotions, not only stories, is also an ability that needs to be observed and studied. We need to look into the ways and means to fulfil the expectations of the public and realise how the acceptance of obvious and visible untrue messages or direct lies

happen for rational individuals. An interesting start could be the one coming from Donald Trump's ability to build very vivid stories, when describing a captivating scenography for his fantasies, that makes the public trust him and be more fascinated by the teller and by the story itself than to reject the false claims and factual lies from his imagination reproduced in words.

We have laid down below some parts of the StratCom¹ instrument, the strategic communication fighting fake news, the way that our governments and the international institutions are taking it. This is not enough. We need some more effectiveness in our reactions, also some pro-activity, when it is about penetrating and influencing the bubbles and the echo chambers or trying to combat with our tools the populist success of communicating via the social media, especially during the pandemic.

Countering information warfare also needs to be done in connection with offensive instruments, tools and techniques. If we cannot share the experiences when working in that part of the information front, we will not be capable of reacting to the art of influencing. The manipulation techniques are known, to a large extent, but there is a great deal to be learned and researched on the capacity of changing the shadows in a scene in a given playground: How you set the light on a scene so that it becomes *trompe oeil*², falsifying the view and the direct perception from the eye and the view sense. Once those techniques are realised, we could see how they act in order to shape fake realities that one could absorb via the senses, giving a huge amount of credibility.

Last but not least, a full research should address the way democracy has evolved without a proper and genuine public space, without a real debate, in a fragmented information space, decreasingly transparent and public. We have less and less the sense that we are sharing the same information that we know is true, less common knowledge about our day-by-day life, and this lack of common

¹ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE).

² Trompe oeil meaning fooling the eye: your view is not transmitting the reality, but the apparent image it sees at one point.

information and lack of debate, of thesis and anti-thesis, discipline of dialogue and arguments, rational approach and critical thinking and too much influx of feelings and emotions are altering democracy. If we add the areas and means for relativization of the truth, we are reaching some limits where our whole democracy needs to be reset, adapted, updated to the new Disinformation 2.0 world.

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