



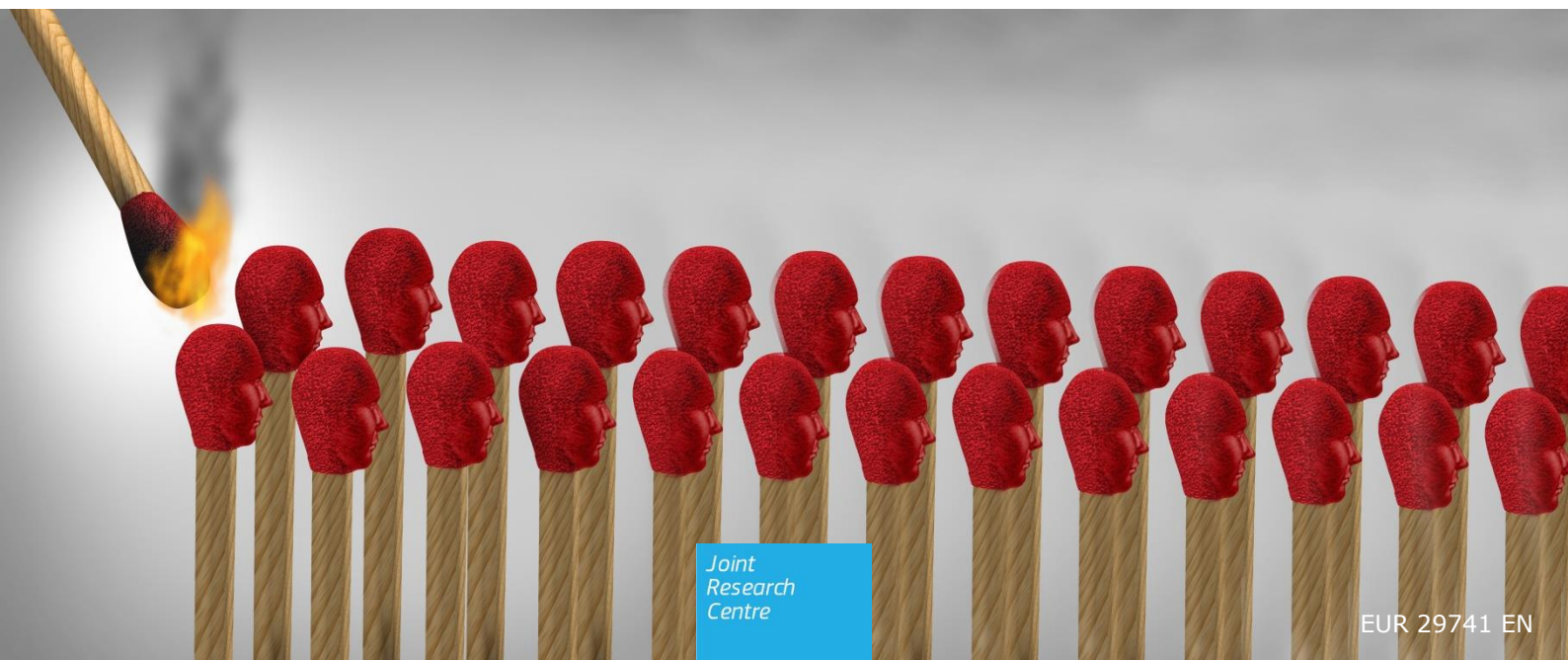
JRC TECHNICAL REPORTS

Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities to Disinformation and Data-Driven Propaganda

*Case Study: The 2018 Italian
General Election*

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Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities to Disinformation and Data-Driven Propaganda

"Credulity is a greater evil in the present day than it ever was before, because, owing to the growth of education, it is much easier than it used to be to spread misinformation, and, owing to democracy, the spread of misinformation is more important than in former times to the holders of power"

Bertrand Russell

Executive Summary

This report analyses citizens' vulnerabilities to disinformation and hostile narratives, taking the 2018 Italian General Election as a case study.

Manipulated information, using a mix of emotionality and rationality, has recently become so pervasive and powerful to the extent of rewriting reality, when spread in an environment where the narration of facts (true, partial or false) counts more than the facts themselves.

Disinformation greatly differs from "fake news", which has been mainly used by politicians as a derogatory term to label news sources that allegedly do not support their positions. Nevertheless, studies have shown that false stories are diffused faster, farther and deeper than any other type of information. Coordinated disinformation campaigns tend to exploit the inner weaknesses of social platforms in order to reach the targeted audience with absolute accuracy.

Until a few years ago, the sources of information were numerous but controllable. The system was centralized, with a one-way transmission system (sender-receiver), which could reach a large number of people not connected to each other. Nowadays, with internet platforms, the geography of communication coincides with the boundaries of the platform itself. Therefore, through a limited number of passages, information may reach very distant points and in a few hours can become viral, regardless of its correctness.

Technological advances have provided producers and sharers of distorted information with new powerful means to reach an ever-wider audience. Social networks, in fact, are able to attract and engage millions of people by giving them a platform where disinformation can spread exponentially fast, often being uncritically picked-up and redistributed to an even larger audience by traditional media. Those platforms were in principle neutral. However, they came to acquire a greater socio-economic value, and became a powerful tool that politicians quickly learned to exploit to address citizens directly, raising new questions concerning the relationship between classical mediation institutes of representative democracy.

Every day, an incredible amount of information is constantly produced on the web. Its diffusion is driven by algorithms, originally conceived for the commercial market, and then maliciously exploited for manipulative purposes and to build consensus, resulting in the creation of what experts defined as "echo chambers", where users are confronted only with similar opinion, rapidly leading to extreme polarization.

Fast technological advances and the pervasiveness of Internet connectivity in shaping public opinion have also dramatically changed the scope, directness and the scale of hostile external interference. Disinformation operations in foreign countries are nothing new and have been a weapon of strategic importance in the arsenal of states for centuries. However, cyberspace is now being used as a powerful platform to destabilize targeted countries through manipulated content, which can be disseminated with a multiplier effect because of its high connectivity, low latency, low cost of entry, and a total disregard for physical distance or national borders.

This report will argue that today's society vulnerability to disinformation operations is not only the result of the threats posed by hostile actors or psychometric profiling - which can be seen as both exploiters and facilitators - but essentially due to the effect of three different factors:

- Information overload;
- Distorted public perceptions produced by online platforms algorithms built for viral advertising and user engagement;
- The complex iteration of fast technology development, globalisation, and post-colonialism, which have rapidly changed the rules-based international order.

The new technological gatekeepers of social reality - which have thrived under few rules, virtually escaping state control - have established forms of de-territorialized citizenship, which is slowly replacing some of the fundamental functions of the nation state.

Governments are increasingly perceived as controlled by external forces, exercising only partial influence over national affairs, thus echoing a situation that we see often in world's poorest countries. This feeling of primitive vulnerability is terrifying the West, leaving its populations shattered and bereft.

Once considered to have the potential to bridge gaps and unite communities geographically separated, information technology seems paradoxically also to have the power to divide groups and fragment interaction, making it easier for people to screen out unwanted contact or information. With the resurgence of tribal identities, geographical boundaries are being supplanted by digital boundaries, and further reflected into society. The effect is not merely a tendency to conform to the group average, but a radicalisation in which such average moves toward the extremes.

In recent times, disinformation strategies have evolved from "hack and dump" cyber-attacks, and randomly sharing conspiracy or made-up stories, into a more complex ecosystem where narratives are used to feed people with emotionally charged true and false information, ready to be "weaponised" when necessary.

The coordinated action of disinformation and data-driven propaganda aims at displacing aspirations with anger born from confusion and despair, destroying social cohesion. In more recent years, Europe has seen a resurgence of identitarian ideology, associated to the political success of populist movements. Their narrative is powerful because it appears inclusive, simple and comprehensible, offering solutions to fears that it has helped generate. All these factors have resulted in citizens' strong demand for security, which has produced a shift towards social authoritarianism and unfold a ferocious critique of cultural liberalism.

Chapter One will examine the evolution of information disorder and distortion of public perceptions. Chapter Two will draw a parallel between current times and the impact of the 15th century printing revolution. Chapter Three will address citizens' vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns and their effects. Chapter Four will analyse Russian "active measures", while Chapter Five will outline the coordinated actions taken by the EU institutions to tackle disinformation. Finally, Chapter Six will be devoted to the case study on the 2018 Italian General Election, where the use of narratives and the exploitation of online platforms' algorithms have contributed to an unprecedented political result.

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1. Introduction

Society has always been exposed to disinformation. One of the most ancient examples dates back to the end of the Roman Republic. After Julius Caesar's death in March 44BC, Octavian and Marc Anthony – respectively adopted son and closest friend of Julius Caesar – emerged as the two contenders for power. What followed was an unequalled disinformation war involving poetry, rhetoric and the use of short and sharp slogans pressed on coins, in a way that may be considered as a predecessor of Twitter¹.

Despite his young age, Octavian proved to be an excellent propaganda strategist. He depicted his opponent as a soldier gone awry, a philanderer, womaniser, a depraved sexual addict, a drunk corrupted by Cleopatra, thus not fit to lead.² He then claimed to have stolen Marc Anthony's official will and testament, most probably fabricated, and read to the Senate its provisions that allegedly included the recognition of Cesareon as the true son of Caesar, vast legacy to Cleopatra's children, and the move of the seat of power from Rome to Alexandria³.

His disinformation campaign played on so many anti-eastern prejudices of ancient Romans, who feared the wealth and luxuries of the eastern regions as a direct threat to the traditional customs (*Mos Maiorum*),⁴ and successfully depicted Marc Anthony as "a degenerate Roman who was striving to subvert the liberties of the Roman people to subjugate Italy and the west under the rule of an oriental queen", having the Senate declare him an enemy of the State.⁵

In the early years of the XX century, states heavily relied on propaganda and disinformation to advance political goals. During the First World War, the British government used propaganda to keep the population motivated against Germany, while in the 1930s, the Nazi party used newly mass media technology to consolidate its power, using racial stereotyping to encourage discrimination against Jews.⁶

In more recent times, online disinformation has evolved from a nuisance confined in obscure online forums, into a powerful tool for hybrid-warfare, organised into hostile narratives.⁷

In a cyberspace that William Gibson⁸ once described as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation",⁹ hostile narratives target feelings and emotions and touch upon particular social vulnerabilities. They are made by true and false

¹ Izabella Kaminska, *A lesson in fake news from the info-wars of ancient Rome*, Financial Times, 17 January 2017.

² Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives*, Harvard University Press, 1920.

³ Frank Sirianni, *Was Anthony's Will Partially Forged?*, *L'Antiquité Classique*, n. 53, 1984.

⁴ The *mos maiorum* were collectively the time-honoured principles, behavioural models, and social practices that affected private, political, and military life in ancient Rome.

⁵ Mario Attilio Levi, *La lotta per la successione di Giulio Cesare e l'avvento di Ottaviano Augusto*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1939.

⁶ James Carson, *What is fake news? Its origins and how it grew in 2016*, The Telegraph, 17 June 2017.

⁷ Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Study of Disinformation*, ETH Center for Security Studies, September 2017.

⁸ William Ford Gibson is an American-Canadian writer and essayist widely credited with pioneering the science-fiction subgenre known as cyberpunk.

⁹ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Berkley Pub. Group, New York, 1984.

information, where the narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves. The different narratives may appear in contradiction one with the other, as they address different population groups. Individuals pick and choose the story elements that make sense to them, accepting a portion of misleading information.

Hostile narratives, organised per themes, are primarily based on social issues, and cross-platform shared in order to enhance virality. Topics are presented to reinforce community and cultural pride, exploiting the tribalism within each targeted community. They are designed to erode trust in mainstream media and institutions. Most of the content used to build these hostile narratives is not always objectively false. Much of it is not even classifiable as hate speech, but it is intended to reinforce tribalism, to polarize and divide, specifically designed to exploit social fractures, creating a distorted perception of reality by eroding the trust in media, institutions and eventually, democracy itself.¹⁰

Over the past fifteen years, social media companies have become enormous corporations that make money by harvesting the data from its users. Their algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, cannot prevent the recrudescence of racism, sexism, and intolerance, on the contrary they bring that to a global scale.¹¹

Following pressure from institutions, platforms have announced initiatives to shift their algorithmic ranking of content towards more visibility for "quality", or the prompt removal of account suspected of sharing disinformation or hostile propaganda;¹² however, they have not provided enough detail for an evaluation of its effectivity.¹³

1.1 Disinformation, Misinformation, and Distorted Perceptions

Disinformation¹⁴ has been defined as "false, inaccurate or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit".¹⁵ There is a slight difference between disinformation and misinformation, with the latter defined as "incorrect information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead".¹⁶

According to Professor Eric Cheyfitz,¹⁷ disinformation is "the process of erasing history, culminating in a disruption or blockage of critical thinking", or a "constant unlearning of the

¹⁰ Renee DiResta, Dr. Kris Shaffer, Becky Ruppel, David Sullivan, Robert Matney, Ryan Fox, Jonathan Albright, Ben Johnson, *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*, New Knowledge, 17 Dec 2018.

¹¹ Fred Turner, *The rise of the internet and a new age of authoritarianism*, Harper's Magazine, 4 March 2019.

¹² Jen Weedon, William Nuland, Alex Stamos, *Information Operations and Facebook*, Facebook Security, 27 April 2017.

¹³ European Commission, *Statement on the Code of Practice against disinformation: Commission asks online platforms to provide more details on progress made*, 28 February 2019.

¹⁴ From the Russian word "дезинформация" (dezinformacija), derived from the title of a KGB black propaganda department. Joseph Stalin allegedly coined the term, giving it a French-sounding name to claim it had a Western origin. (Ion Mihai Pacepa, Ronald J. Rychlak, *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism*, WND Books, Washington, DC, 2013).

¹⁵ European Commission, *A multi-dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, March 2018.

¹⁶ Bernd Carsten Stahl, *On the Difference or Equality of Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation: A Critical Research Perspective*, Informing Science Journal, Volume 9, 2006.

¹⁷ Eric Cheyfitz is professor of American Studies and Humane Letters at Cornell University.

facts”,¹⁸ as the ability to think critically is deeply linked to the ability to think historically. In this sense, disinformation mitigates the conscious processing of information, creating a structure where contradictions are not recognised.¹⁹

Disinformation greatly differs from “fake news”, which has been mainly used by politicians as a derogatory term to label news sources that do not support their positions.²⁰ For this reason, the term has completely lost its connection with the actual veracity of the information presented.²¹

A recent EuroBarometer survey (figure 1) reported that a large majority of European citizens believe they can identify fake stories;²² however research shows that public perceptions are often inaccurate, in particular on topics that are being widely discussed in the media.²³

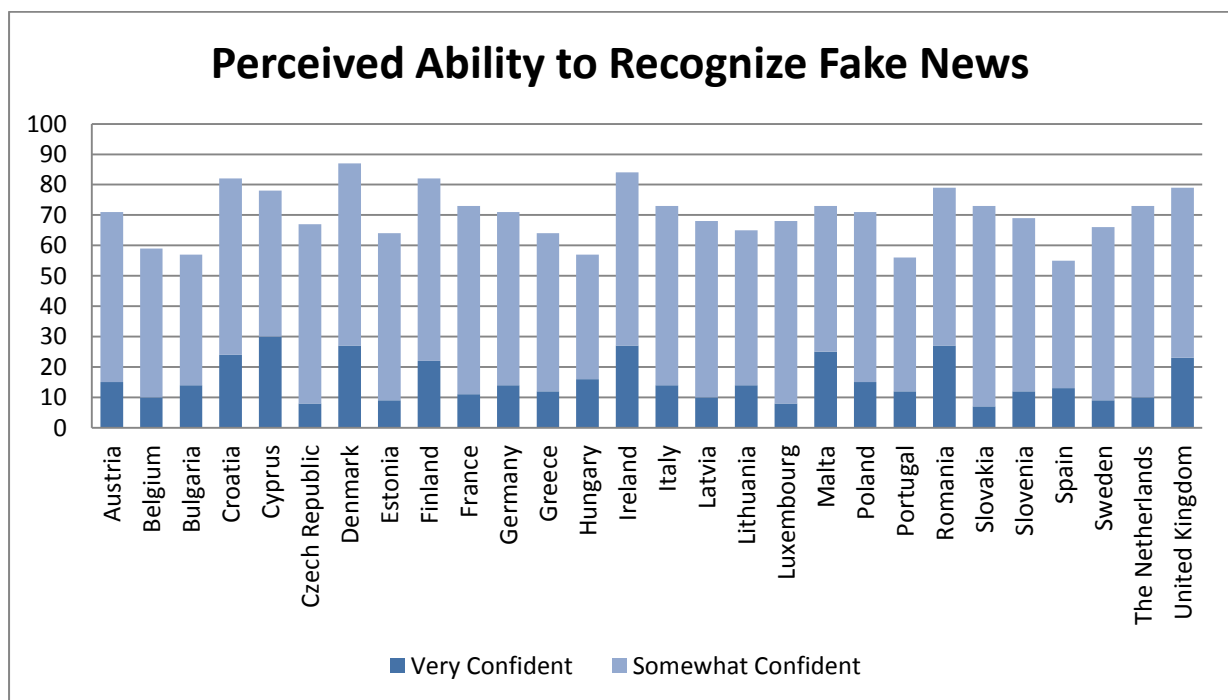


Figure 1 - Source: Eurobarometer

In a world overloaded with information, fake stories are designed to attract attention. Although many are visibly quite fantastical and implausible, they deceive the heuristic accuracy judgements, often impacting on personal beliefs and actions.

Such mechanism has been defined as misperception. The notion refers to “factual beliefs that are false or contradict the best available evidence in the public domain. These beliefs may originate internally (e.g. as a result of cognitive biases or mistaken inferences) or with external sources (e.g. media coverage)”.²⁴ Misperception of the surrounding world has consequences on

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, Melville House, Brooklyn, NY, 2014.

¹⁹ Eric Cheyfitz, *The disinformation age: the collapse of liberal democracy in the USA*, Taylor&Francis Group, 2017.

²⁰ Donald Trump first used the term “fake news” in January 2017 to attack CNN journalist Jim Acosta.

²¹ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sian Aral, *The spread of trues and false news online*, Science, vol. 359, March 2016.

²² Eurobarometer Report, *Fake news and disinformation online*, Flash Eurobarometer 464, April 2018.

²³ Bobby Duffy, *The Perils of Perception: Why We’re Wrong about Nearly Everything*, Atlantic Books, 2018.

²⁴ Bobby Duffy, *The Perils of Perception...*

evaluations and subsequent decisions, because if perceptions are distorted, then evaluations will be groundless and decisions might be inadequate or counterproductive. People's opinion can be distorted on a wide array of issues and not necessarily because of ignorance or poor education.²⁵ Misperceptions seems particularly common when debating politics, health and science,²⁶ and may promote extremism and conflicts. Different elements, partly individual and partly contextual, contribute to misperception, as a large amount of people, unable to untangle themselves in the complexity of society, to reassure themselves and feel adequate, seek simplified explanations, often emotionality charged, that will help them *feel* what they cannot understand.²⁷

People constantly exposed to massive amount of information, tend to trust opinions that were formed in and shaped by those groups that confirm pre-existing convictions, with an effect known as "bandwagoning".²⁸ It is the "illusory truth effect", which is the mechanism that confers trustworthiness to stories via previous exposure, despite their low level of overall believability.²⁹ Repetition increases the ease with which statements are processed, which in turn is used heuristically to infer accuracy.³⁰ Social psychology provided an explanation of this process, known as the Dunning-Kruger effect. The effect "is a cognitive bias in which individuals, who are unskilled at a particular task, believe themselves to possess above-average ability in performing the task. On the other hand, as individuals become more skilled in a particular task, they may mistakenly believe that they possess below-average ability in performing those tasks because they may assume that all others possess equal or greater ability".³¹

Misperceptions interfere with two main "democratic competences": heuristics and aggregation. The first is defined as "common judgmental shortcuts that people use to draw complicated

²⁵ Bobby Duffy, *Why are people so often wrong about their own countries?*, The Guardian, 2 December 2015.

²⁶ For example, misperception played an important role in Brexit debate. Citizens were in fact misinformed about the size of the immigrant population, and EU administrative costs. (Neil T Gavin, *Media definitely do matter: Brexit, immigration, climate change and beyond*, The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, Vol 20, Issue 4, 2018).

²⁷ D.J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, *The Nature and origins of Misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics*, Advances in Political Psychology, Volume 38, Issue 51, February 2017.

²⁸ Emanuele Baldacci, Dario Buono, Fabrice Gras, *Fake News and information asymmetries: data as public good*, Dataforpolicy.org, London, 2017.

²⁹ Ian Maynard Begg, Ann Anas, Suzanne Farinacci, *Dissociation of Processes in Belief: Source Recollection, Statement Familiarity, and the Illusion of Truth*, Journal of Experimental Psychology, Vol. 121, No. 4, 446-45, 1992.

³⁰ For more info: Adam L. Alter, Daniel M. Oppenheimer, *Uniting the Tribes of Fluency to Form a Metacognitive Nation*, Personality and Social Psychology Review, Volume 13, Issue 3, August 2009; Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein, and Thomas Toppino, *Frequency and the Conference of Referential Validity*, Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, N. 16(1), February 1977; Rolf Reber, Piotr Winkielman, Norbert Schwarz, *Effects of Perceptual Fluency on Affective Judgments*, Psychological Science, Volume 9, Issue 1, January 1998; Christian Unkelbach, *Reversing the Truth Effect: Learning the Interpretation of Processing Fluency in Judgments of Truth*, Journal of Experimental Psychology Learning Memory and Cognition, n. 33(1), February 2007; Wei Chun Wang, Nadia Brashier, Erik Wing, Elizabeth Marsh, Roberto Cabeza, *On Known Unknowns: Fluency and the Neural Mechanisms of Illusory Truth*, Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, n. 28(5), January 2016; Bruce W. A. Whittlesea, *Illusions of familiarity*, Journal of Experimental Psychology Learning Memory and Cognition, n. 19(6), November 1993; Christian Unkelbach, Sarah C Rom, *A referential theory of the repetition-induced truth effect*, Cognition, n. 160, 2017.

³¹ Justin Kruger, David Dunning, *Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, n. 77 (6), 1999.

interference from simple environmental clues", while the latter focuses on the "aggregation of individual level preferences into collective public opinion".³²

In this context, heuristics is used when a person recognizes their lack of knowledge, but misperception can lead to wrong self-perception of being well-informed.³³ Aggregation is used to balance random errors in individual level preferences, but in presence of systematic misperceptions, aggregation will magnify individual misinformation to public level.³⁴ This can produce negative consequence for public debate, as politicians may be reluctant to listen to or engage with a widely misinformed constituency.³⁵

Scholars identified four categories of people participating in public debates (figure 2):³⁶

The active misinformed pose more concern, as they not only hold an incorrect knowledge, but they are also publicly involved. In this particular case, corrective information fails to change their false beliefs, as people have difficulties to accept their information to be discredited.³⁷

Motivated reasoning theory³⁸ suggests that information selection is influenced by goals and "leads people to seek out information that reinforces their preferences (confirmation bias), counter-argue information that

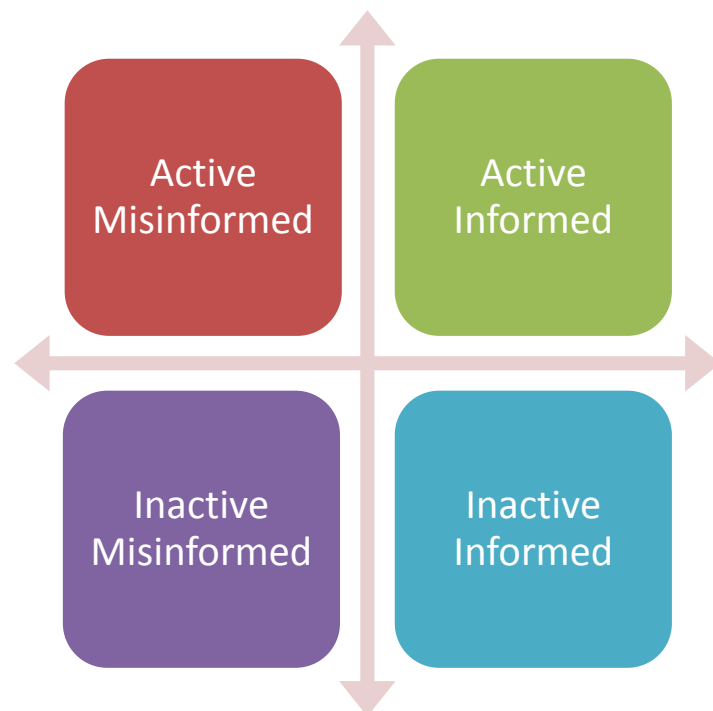


Figure 2 - Factual Beliefs in Public Opinion

contradicts their preferences (disconfirmation bias), and view

pro-attitudinal information as more convincing than counter-attitudinal information (prior attitude effect)".³⁹ A main trigger to this kind of reasoning is identity threat: when a fact is

³² Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins, Samuel L. Popkin, *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

³³ David Dunning, *The Dunning-Kruger effect: On being ignorant of one's own ignorance*, in *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 44, Academic Press, San Diego, 2011.

³⁴ D.J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, *The Nature and origins of Misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics*, *Advances in Political Psychology*, Volume 38, Issue 51, February 2017.

³⁵ Michael Honda, *Misinformation Makes Town Hall Meetings Tough*, *The Mercury News*, 8 September 2009.

³⁶ Jennifer L. Hochschild, Katherine Levine Einstein, *Do Facts Matter? Information and Misinformation in American Politics*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2015.

³⁷ John G. Bullock, Alan S. Gerber, Seth J. Hill, Gregory A. Huber, *Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics*, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, n. 10, 2015.

³⁸ Ayelet Fishbach, Melissa Ferguson, *The goal construct in social psychology*, *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles*, The Guilford Press, New York, 2007.

³⁹ Charles S. Taber, Milton Lodge, *Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs*, *American Journal of Political Science*, n. 50 (3), 2006.

perceived as threatening of one's identity, the most natural response is to resist it. This behaviour may be reinforced by groups' dynamics, when reasoning is influenced by the need of reinforcing existing loyalties rather than assessing the correctness of a fact.⁴⁰ People can then agree with a false statement as a pure expressive response signalling support to a specific group or individual.⁴¹

Recent studies have also assessed to what extent false stories are diffused faster, farther, and deeper than any other kind of information, often aided by their virality, characterized by a designed branching process.⁴² Exploiting platforms' algorithms, falsehoods are often diffused online by accounts with small following, sometimes recently created, without affecting the spread effect. This can be explained because novelty attracts attention, contributes to understanding the world, helps decision-making, and encourages information sharing.⁴³

It has also been observed that "bad news" spread as more as they are loaded with strong negative emotions, like anger or fear, making them the perfect match for the construction of a hostile narrative. The "availability heuristics"⁴⁴ makes people overestimate the frequency of negative events, while the confirmation bias pushes them to look for news, opinions and evidence that support what has already been convinced, and above all to ignore everything that conflicts with previous beliefs.⁴⁵ For this reason, during political crises, social media users not only share content from reliable sources, but also extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, fraudulent, and other forms of unsubstantiated content.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Paluck, Hana Shepherd, *The salience of social referents: A field experiment on collective norms and harassment behaviour in a school social network*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, n. 103 (6), 2012.

⁴¹ Alan Gerber, Donald P. Green, Christopher W. Larimer, *Social pressure and voter turnout: Evidence from a large-scale field experiment*, *American Political Science Review*, n. 102 (01), 2008.

⁴² Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sian Aral, *The spread of trues and false news online*, *Science*, vol. 359, Issue 6380, March 2016.

⁴³ James Druckman, Erik Peterson, Rune Slothuus, *How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation*, *American Political Science Review*, n. 107 (1), 2013.

⁴⁴ The availability heuristic is a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to a given person's mind when evaluating a specific topic, concept, method or decision.

⁴⁵ Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, *Science*, Vol. 185, Issue 4157, Sep 1974.

⁴⁶ Vidya Narayanan, Vlad Barash, John Kelly, Bence Kollanyi, *Polarization, partisanship and junk news consumption over social media in the US*, *Comprop*, February 2018.

1.1.1 A New Information Landscape

"Today in the cyberspace a multilingual community lives with a very high degree of civilization, competence and tolerance. Maybe it will not always be this way. Maybe there will soon be some crazy splinters, some "pirates of the network" that will capture the flows of information, disrupt them, and make them unreliable" (Nicoletta Castagni, 1995)

Nowadays a relatively small group of people can take advantage of social media interaction and algorithms to reach a wider public. Many began with the only objective to monetise visibility by publishing incredible stories using politically driven content. This was impossible before the internet, for three reasons:

- Distribution was immensely expensive.
- Building a large audience was slower as gaining the trust of readers took a long time and fake stories would have damaged the reputation of the outlet.
- Because of the high costs for distribution, few players were present whose activity could be easily regulated.⁴⁷

From the beginning of the XXI century, technological advances allowed people to easily setup dynamic websites using publishing platforms like WordPress or Blogger, while social media gave users a wider audience to share information and content at virtually no cost. With the destruction of the entry barrier, reputation became an expendable asset, while the exponential increase of subjects made virtually impossible to control and regulate. Therefore, pages can be easily set up to spread disinformation on social platforms, bringing visibility and enormous revenues from ads. As the entry barrier is so low, even if the page is downgraded or banned, the publisher can simply create another one and start again.⁴⁸

Disinformation should be considered a fully integrated cyber-warfare tool. There are organizations financed by commercial, political or government agencies that use highly advanced technological tools to influence public opinion with the specific purpose of sowing doubt. Troll-farms are established, organised and financed to attack prominent people, political parties or newspapers. Much of the content comes in the form of memes, which are images with writings that often escape controls,⁴⁹ and is created and distributed in specific social communities, such as gamers, or far-right political activists, exploiting custom targeting that allowed the creation of dark ads,⁵⁰ calibrated on people's taste and political orientation.

⁴⁷ James Carson, *What is fake news? Its origins and how it grew in 2016*, The Telegraph, 17 June 2017.

⁴⁸ James Carson, *What is fake...*

⁴⁹ Paul Gil, *What is a Meme?*, Lifewire, 18 February 2019.

⁵⁰ Dark ads are a type of online advertising visible only to the advert's publisher and the intended target group. (Alex Hern, *Facebook 'dark ads' can swing political opinions*, The Guardian, 31 July 2017).

Content is then shared on other platforms, quite often being uncritically picked-up by journalists or politicians.⁵¹

Fake or manipulated content is progressively shifting from social networks to chats (e.g. WhatsApp; Telegram; etc.), where it is very hard to control, with tragic consequences such as the explosions of violence in India or Pakistan.⁵²

The progressive increase in mistrust in institutions, not only political but also cultural ones, has led people to seek the comfort of their peers, ending up embracing alternative narratives of reality, often linked to conspiracy theories. Polarisation has dramatically increased in the last decades and social platforms have created a more homogeneous audience, which is less tolerant for alternative views, strengthening the attitude of accepting only ideologically compatible information.⁵³ People prefer information consistent with their pre-existing beliefs (confirmation bias), and that pleases them (desirability bias). This undermines the effectiveness of fact-checking, as in many circumstances people tend to remember how they *feel* about information and not the context, thus confusing familiarity with reliability,⁵⁴ in what has been defined by American comedian Stephen Colbert as “truthiness”, meaning “the belief in what you feel to be true rather than what the facts will support”.⁵⁵

Public figures and the media have a key role in disseminating false and unsupported information. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number and type of news programs available, with a troubling amount of partisan programs that often feature false or exaggerated information. However, it needs to be said that scholars do not agree whether these programs increase misperception among an audience that already hold strongly established biases.⁵⁶ Clearly, a misleading coverage of a crime contributes to a widespread misperception of crime rate in a specific area.⁵⁷

Although powerful in feeding people with what they want to read, it is still possible to encounter a wider variety of opinion online. The problem is how people get these opposing views: in the past they would have come from newspapers, in an individual experience. Online, everybody is constantly connected to their community, seeking the approval from like-minded peers. It's like constantly sitting with fellow fans in a football stadium, in what sociologists defined as strengthening the feelings of "in-group" belonging by increasing the distance with

⁵¹ Camera dei Deputati, *Audizione della Commissione per i diritti e i doveri relativi a Internet*, 27 June 2017.

⁵² For more info: Timothy McLaughlin, *How WhatsApp Fuels Fake News and Violence in India*, *Wired*, 12 December 2018; Timothy McLaughlin, *Disinformation is Spreading on WhatsApp in India and it's Getting Dangerous*, *Wired*, 5 September 2018.

⁵³ David M.J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, *The Science of Fake News*, *Science*, vol. 359 issue 6380, March 2018.

⁵⁴ Briony Swire, Ullrich K H Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, *The Role of Familiarity in Correcting Inaccurate Information*, *Journal of Experimental Psychology Learning Memory and Cognition*, n. 43(12), June 2017.

⁵⁵ Travis Riddle, *Scientists Dissect the Psychology of "Truthiness"*, *Scientific American*, Volume 307, Issue 4, October 2012.

⁵⁶ Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America*, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

⁵⁷ German Lopez, *Americans don't know crime has plummeted. In fact, they think it's gone up*, *Vox*, 10 October 2016.

the "out-group", in a "us versus them" dynamic. This is the main reason that makes fact-checking projects less effective, because belonging is stronger than facts.⁵⁸

2. Lessons from the Past (The Benefit of Hindsight)

In his book "The Third Wave", futurist Alvin Toffler described three types of societies that throughout human history pushed older society and culture aside. According to his classification, during the first wave Agriculture Society replaced the Hunter-Gatherer Society of the post-Neolithic. The second wave was the Industrial Age, "based on mass production, mass distribution, mass consumption, mass education, mass media, mass recreation, mass entertainment, and weapons of mass destruction." The Third Wave began in the 1950s and he described it as the Information Age. Each era was pushed by a revolution in information distribution.⁵⁹

The dynamics of current "internet era" bear lots of similarities with the "printing press era", because of the broad and profound effects they both have (and had) on society.

Fifteen century Europe opened the door to the modern world. With its ferments, the deep tensions that animated the intellectual world as well as the religious and political world, the fundamental characteristics of the passing from one era to another were already present and progressively more and more defined. The two great powers of the feudal world, the Empire and the Papacy, in steady contrast with each other for absolute supremacy, saw their prerogatives fall and began descending into a completely irreversible crisis. The desire for greater autonomy of the monarchies in France, England and Spain, together with that of many European cities, where the emerging bourgeois class lived, hindered the exercise of imperial power. At the same time the Papacy, worn-out by the Avignon residency, was unable to contrast the propagation of religious schisms on the edge of heresy, which already foresee the Lutheran Reform.⁶⁰

From a socio-economic perspective, feudal barriers fell and trade routes opened up, a phenomenon that began in Italy with City-States and Maritime Republics,⁶¹ and quickly reached the rest of Europe. The growing commercial and manufacturing activities lessened the conflict between bourgeoisie and nobility, both involved with the same economic interests.⁶² The cultural needs of men no longer segregated in the medieval microcosm of the village, but thrown into the world in search of profits, were pushed by the reborn interest for ancient Greek

⁵⁸ Zeynep Tufekci, *How social media took us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump*, Technology Review, 14 August 2018.

⁵⁹ Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, 1981.

⁶⁰ Renata Ago, Vittorio Vidotto, *Storia Moderna*, Laterza, Bologna, 2008.

⁶¹ Italian Maritime Republics were: Pisa; Amalfi; Genoa; Venice. (Marc'Antonio Bragadin, *Storia delle Repubbliche marinare*, Odoya, Bologna 2010)

⁶² Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: The Financial History of the World*. Penguin, 2008

and Latin culture, as Humanism produced a new philosophical vision that trigger a rebellion to the rigid patterns of the feudal world.⁶³

2.1 Revolution in Dissemination

According to Marshall McLuhan “the invention of movable type was the decisive moment in the change from a culture in which all the senses partook of a common interplay to a tyranny of the visual”. The typography contributed to the birth of modern man, allowing it to develop capacities hitherto dormant.⁶⁴

The first prints attributable to Gutenberg are the "Letters of Indulgence" and the "Appeal against the Turks". The first consisted in a letter by which Pope Niccolò V granted indulgence to all those who had helped “by means and offers” to the fight against the Turks, who had conquered Constantinople in 1453 and brought down the Eastern Roman Empire. The second was probably printed by Gutenberg as a test. Both products show us how the new invention shifted book production towards new perspectives. The possibility of reproducing a large number of all identical copies of the same work immediately created a new market that was unthinkable before. Alongside the printing of books, the production of indulgences, calendars, and pamphlets on topics often ephemeral, the proto-typographers did not addressed only scholars, but laid the foundations of modern advertising related to the production of large quantities of publications.⁶⁵



Figure 3 – Printing Workshop

The invention quickly spread first in Germany, then in the rest of Europe. Italy's rich cities, cradles of Humanism and the Renaissance, were the first to host a large number of German printers. Books became immediately a commodity, something no more confined to monasteries, but objects that attracted the interest of a wider audience. The industrial process had brought the prices of books down so much that they were transformed into consumer goods, bought by the growing number of people belonging to the middle class who could read and write. In Venice, Aldo Manunzio became one of the first publishers, invented the *cursive* typeface, and contributed to the diffusion of a large amount of Greek and Latin classics.⁶⁶

⁶³ Riccardo Fubini, *L'umanesimo Italiano e i suoi storici: origini Rinascimentali*, Critica Moderna, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2001

⁶⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, 1962.

⁶⁵ Mario Ferrigni, *Gutenberg*, Hoepli, Milano, 1939.

⁶⁶ Neri Pozza, *L'Editoria Veneziana. Da Giovanni da Spira ad Aldo Manunzio*, Storia della Cultura Veneta. Dal Primo Quattrocento al Concilio di Trento, vol. 2, Vicenza, 1980.

In Strasbourg, Johan Mantelein, most probably a Gutenberg worker, understanding the commercial possibilities of people's fascination for the new invention, turned his work to the service of the secular world. He made his debut with a very bad edited Bible, nevertheless revealing his business sense because he had succeeded in compressing the enormous bulk into just 850 pages. The second edition of the Bible presented another novelty: it was in German. This was followed by the publication of medieval poetry, books of legends, fairy tales, and leaflets. In Mainz, Johann Fust, one of the closest business partners of Gutenberg, was the first to bring the invention to Paris. During his presentation at the Sorbonne, he was ousted and accused of witchcraft, because "only the Devil could have dozens of copies of the same book". Immediately afterwards, three German printers were invited to set up the first printing press at the university, and started printing in French.⁶⁷

The invention of movable type led to a noticeable leap in social evolution, which socio-cultural-economic effects are not easy to quantify, as it spread so rapidly in such a short time in all Europe. It created the first industrial production process in the history of mankind, with a clear division of labour in precise phases, to produce large quantities of objects at the same time. By the end of the seventeenth century, the quantity of publishing products had assumed unimaginable dimensions for a man who lived only two centuries before.⁶⁸

Distribution and sales techniques were developed that allowed the widest and fastest diffusion of the new merchandise. Producing and distributing more books also meant spreading more and more information that reached even the most remote corners of Europe in a relatively short time. Renaissance men were overwhelmed by a multitude of publications of all kind, finally in a language they spoke and not in the obscure Latin of the Church or in the unknown Greek of scholars.⁶⁹

The need to sell an increasing amount of books to boost profits, led also to the distribution of publications hitherto prohibited, with superstitions, manipulated content, or promoting paganism. A tragic example was the "Malleus Maleficarum", an anti-witchcraft manual that was widespread and used to justify atrocious violence and torture against women.⁷⁰

The fact that a message or an event could be communicated to thousands of people in a language understandable by everyone was a huge potential, immediately implemented by the ruling class. From the beginning of the sixteenth century the sovereigns of all Europe had begun to exploit the new invention to enhance their image. But it was Martin Luther who immediately recognised the power of the new invention to spread his reformist ideas, setting up a printing shop in Wittenberg.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Nicoletta Castagni, *Gutenberg: la Mirabile Invenzione*, Storia dei Mass Media: dalla Selce al Silicio, Gutenberg 2000, Milano, 1984.

⁶⁸ Nicoletta Castagni, *Gutenberg...*

⁶⁹ Nicoletta Castagni, *Gutenberg...*

⁷⁰ Giordano Berti, *Storia della Stregoneria. Origini, credenze, persecuzioni e rinascita nel mondo contemporaneo*, Mondadori, Milano 2010.

⁷¹ Claudio Pozzoli, *Vita di Martin Lutero*, Rusconi, Milano, 1983.

The success of the reform was also due to new production techniques, which required new products to be disseminated. Message and instrument thus formed a unity, in which the book went from being a precious treasure to that of being a commodity. The sacredness of the object then passed from the book to its contents. The concepts of "author" and "reader" were created, and the technological innovation was operating a profound mutation that definitively separated medieval and modern man.⁷²

3. Understanding Vulnerabilities

The increased international complexity has made society particularly vulnerable to disinformation operations, not only as a result of the threats posed by hostile actors or psychometric profiling - which can be seen as both exploiters or facilitators - but due to the effect of three different factors:

- Information overload;
- The impact on public opinion of online platforms built for viral advertising and users' engagement;
- The complex iteration among fast technology development, globalization, and post-colonialism, which have rapidly changed the international order.

In 1983, computer science pioneer Luigi Dadda wrote: "It is happening. It is now under everyone's eyes. An evolution of our way of producing, of communicating, of living, so fast to be called a revolution, the post-industrial revolution. It is provoked by a complex mix of cultural, social, economic, scientific, and technological factors, among which the latter emerge as a driving force. All technology is involved, but one is imposed, that related to the generation, collection, transmission, elaboration, and dissemination of information".⁷³

Resilience to rapid technological changes were considered central by futurist Alvin Toffler, who argued that these changes have occurred so quickly that a large number of people were unable to adapt and experienced undue stress and confusion, introducing the term "future shock", based on the concept of "culture shock".⁷⁴

Human beings live in linear world, while technology grows at exponential rate. According to IBM Senior Vice President for Cognitive Solutions, John E. Kelly III: "The only time an exponential growth is experienced is when something is accelerating, like a car, or decelerating really suddenly with a hard braking. And when that happens, you feel uncertain and uncomfortable for a short period of time. The feeling being engendered now among a lot of people is that of always being in this state of acceleration."⁷⁵

⁷² Giovanni Giovannini, *Storia dei Mass Media: dalla Selce al Silicio*, Gutenberg 2000, Milano, 1984.

⁷³ Luigi Dadda, *Media Duemila*, n.1, Torino, 1983.

⁷⁴ The term was first used in 1958 to describe the anxiety produced when a person moves to a completely new environment.

⁷⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late*, Penguin Books, New York, 2011.

Moreover, X Development⁷⁶ CEO Eric “Astro” Teller, also tried to explain how technological advancements are challenging human ability to adapt: “Imagine two curves on a graph. One line represents scientific progress. At first it moves up very gradually, and then it starts to slope higher as innovations build on innovations that have come before, and then it starts to soar straight to the sky. A thousand years ago that curve rose so gradually that it could take one hundred years for the world to look and feel dramatically different”.⁷⁷

Teller argues that the slow technological development during the Middle-Ages did not produced visible social effects, but that changed dramatically in the XX Century, when the process of technological and scientific advance began to speed up, having effects on society: “At the beginning of the century it would have taken 20 or 30 years for technology to make the world uncomfortably different. Think about the introduction of the car or the airplane. Then the slope of the curve started to go almost straight up and off the graph with the convergence of mobile devices, broadband connectivity, and cloud computing. These developments diffused the tools of innovation to many more people on the planet, enabling them to drive change farther, faster, and more cheaply”.⁷⁸

“The second line”, argues Teller “is the rate at which humanity, individuals and society, adapts to changes in its environment. These can be technological, geophysical, and social changes. Humanity has got a little bit faster at adapting over the centuries, thanks to greater literacy and knowledge diffusion”.⁷⁹

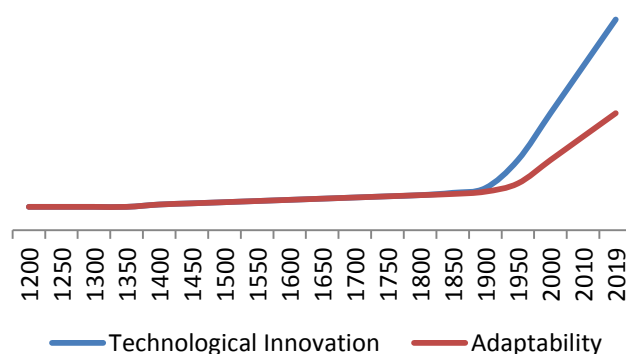


Figure 4 - Technological Innovation and Human Adaptability

The acceleration speed of innovation, much above the rate of absorption, is causing cultural angst as societal structures are in constant catch-up mode and cannot keep the pace with the rate of change. “If the technology platform for society can now turn over in five to seven years”, argues Teller, “but it takes ten to fifteen years to adapt to it, we will all feel out of control, because we cannot adapt to the world as fast as it is changing. By the time we get used to the change, that will not even be the prevailing change anymore”.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ X Development LLC. (formerly Google X) is an American semi-secret research and development facility and organization founded by Google in January 2010, which now operates as a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc.

⁷⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank you for...*

⁷⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank you for...*

⁷⁹ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank you for...*

⁸⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank you for...*

3.1 Overload of Information

"I fear that we will remain in our current confusion and indigence for our own fault. I am afraid even that after uselessly exhausted our curiosity without obtaining any gain from our research any weight for our happiness, people get tired of science and, driven by a fatalistic discomfort, replaced by barbaric costumes, and perhaps this result will contribute a lot of that horrible mass of books that grows incessantly. Then, in the end, such disorder can no longer be sheltered: the indefinite multitude of writers will soon condemn them to the danger of a general oblivion, the hope of glory that animates many and pushes them to study, will suddenly cease, perhaps it will become in the future as blameworthy to write a book as soon as it was praiseworthy". (Gottfried Leibnitz, 1680)

The information explosion that caused so much concern in Leibnitz accelerated in the last decades following the development of democracy, information pluralism, decentralization of powers, and decolonization of countries that claimed their place in the international scenario, quickly becoming producers and consumers of information. At the increased public participation to social life, coincided an increased demand for information, causing a progressive saturation which inevitably turned what took the name of "information society" into a society of disinformation, ignorance and incompetence.⁸¹

Dealing with overload of information is a concern that troubled philosophers and intellectuals since the invention of the movable type. Descartes biographer, Adrien Baillet, complaining about the growing production of information, wrote something that now sounds like a premonition: "We have reason to fear that the multitude of books which grows every day in a prodigious fashion will make the following centuries fall into a state as barbarous as that of the centuries that followed the fall of the Roman Empire. Unless we try to prevent this danger by separating those books which we must throw out or leave in oblivion from those which one should save and within the latter between what is useful and what is not".⁸²

The chaos produced by the overload of information has been amplified by three main drivers:

- Manipulation of sources.
- Insufficient mediation between the source of the message and the recipient.
- Difficulty for the user to manage the mass of information available.

Our knowledge structure is influenced not only by contents, but also by the techniques used to process information, which are not neutral and their consequences do not depend solely on who employs them, but on what they mediate and why. Marshall McLuhan wrote "The effects of

⁸¹ Sergio Lepri, *Medium e Messaggio. Il Trattamento Linguistico e Concettuale dell'Informazione*, Gutenberg, 1986.

⁸² Adrien Baillet, *Jugemens des sçavans sur les principaux ouvrages des auteurs*, Paris, 1685.

technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance", consequently "the medium is the message" or rather the medium is also the message.⁸³

In the era of Internet, with the progressive disappearance of vertical media in an increasingly "liquid society", some experts, like sociologist Derrick De Kerkchove, updated the famous sentence to a more modern "the network is the message", with the network intended in a technical form, as production and consumption of content and as a form of structuring social ties.⁸⁴ Tom Goodwin instead flips it into "the message is the medium", arguing that in the new hyper-connected media ecosystem, there will be no more dedicated channels and devices, but only different levels of content.⁸⁵

Italian philosopher and writer Umberto Eco once compared the condition of people exposed to a massive overload of information to Borges' character Funes "el memorioso", who was incredibly capable of retaining any kind of information he could reach, but was unable to process any.⁸⁶

New technologies have disrupted traditional gatekeepers, like governments or media, control over information flows. Online platforms have broken down what social scientists call "pluralistic ignorance", meaning the belief that everyone is alone with its own views in a reality where everyone has been collectively silenced.

In the beginning social media fomented so much rebellion, because people realized to be no more isolated and drew strength from one another. It was a central tool during the so-called Arab spring that toppled down many longstanding autocrats.⁸⁷ In Egypt, during the Tahrir uprising, President Mubarak attempted to suffocate protests by cutting off internet cellular service. He did not understand that in an era where information is abundant, attention is what matters. Cairo revolutionaries quickly found other ways to send out information through satellite phones, allowing them to continue giving interviews and sending data to an increasingly interested global audience. Within few weeks, Mubarak was forced out.⁸⁸

In less than ten years, digital technologies have gone from being regarded as a beacon for freedom and change to become a threat to democracy, enabling increasing polarization, rising authoritarianism, and meddling with national elections. Arab spring and Barack Obama election were hailed as the dawn of a new era, where big data, Smartphones, and the rapid spread of information would have represented a "deadly combination for dictators". It also fed the illusion

⁸³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1964.

⁸⁴ Ignazia Bartholini, *Capitale Sociale, Reti Comunicative e Culture di Ppartecipazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2008.

⁸⁵ Tom Goodwin, *In the new age of ubiquitous connectivity the message is the medium*, TechCrunch, 4 March 2017.

⁸⁶ Umberto Eco wrote: "Jorge Luis Borges once wrote a beautiful novel, entitled Funes el memorioso, about a character that remembers everything, every leaf he saw on every tree, every word he heard in his life, every gust of wind he felt, every taste that he has tasted, and every letter he has read. Yet Funes is a complete idiot, a man blocked by his inability to select and throw away. Our unconscious works because it throws away. The World Wide Web is Funes El Memorioso". (Umberto Eco, *Cronache di una Societa Liquida*, La nave di Teseo, 2016.)

⁸⁷ Mohammed Nouredine Affaya, *The Arab Spring: Breaking the chains of authoritarianism and postponed democracy*, Contemporary Arab Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2011.

⁸⁸ Zeynep Tufekci, *How Social Media...*

that democracies would have had always the upper hand, and led to the exploitation of digital vulnerabilities (e.g. bugs, secret backdoors, exploits, etc.) following a concept named "nobody but us" (NOBUS for the intelligence community), meaning that nobody could have used these vulnerabilities, so there was no need to patch them or strengthening cyber-security.⁸⁹

The mistaken interpretation of digital security facilitated Russian interference with 2016 USA Presidential elections, where the hacking and release of DNC Committee emails, subverted the debate by flooding the public with distorted or irrelevant information.⁹⁰

The insufficient mediation between the source and the message has led many people assume to be knowledgeable, entitled to their own opinions,⁹¹ supported by Google or Wikipedia, and by the ease with which they can express them on social networks. There is so much information around that people believe can absorb it only by immersion.⁹² People with little knowledge are afraid of educated people and develop hostility to knowledge.⁹³ These dynamics has created a conflict between the people who fabricated the most convenient truth and the experts, who have to deal with a framework of shared truth. Incredibly, even mass education has its responsibilities: there are people convinced that their cultural background is sufficient to challenge the consent of experts, for example in the medical field.⁹⁴

Umberto Eco once stated in an interview: "The abundance of information is certainly the engine for democratic development, but it is not so always true. This abundance, in fact, is a very democratic factor when it comes to a dictatorship, but it can have dictatorial implications when it is present in a democratic system. As the totality of contents are available in a disordered, unfiltered and unorganised manner, the Internet allows everyone to build their own encyclopaedia, meant as a system through which a culture filters, preserves and eliminates information. In theory, we can get six billion different encyclopaedias: is this a democratic acquisition? I do not think so, because the function of an encyclopaedia is precisely that of establishing what should be preserved and what should be thrown away. In asserting that Ptolemy was wrong and Galileo right, the encyclopaedia excludes those crazy writers who still today write volumes to show that the earth is flat. By filtering these positions, the encyclopaedia creates a platform of common language and only on the basis of this platform one can challenge the prevailing theories".⁹⁵

Digital technologies have on one hand weakened old-style information gatekeepers, empowering decentralized actors; but on the other hand have given the power to authoritarians

⁸⁹ Zeynep Tufekci, *How Social Media...*

⁹⁰ Ellen Nakashima, Shane Harris, *How the Russians hacked the DNC and passed its emails to WikiLeaks*, The Washington Post, 13 July 2018.

⁹¹ Jamie Whyte, *The Right to Your Opinion. Crimes Against Logic*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2004; Patrick Stokes, *You're not entitled to your opinion*, NZ Herald, 9 October 2012.

⁹² Daniel M. Wegner, Adrian F. Ward, *The Internet Has Become the External Hard Drive for Our Memories*, Scientific American, Volume 309, Issue 6, 2013.

⁹³ Crystal C. Hall, Lynn Ariss, Alexander Todorov, *The illusion of knowledge: When more information reduces accuracy and increases confidence*, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, n. 103, 2007.

⁹⁴ Matthew Fisher, Mariel K. Goddu, Frank C. Keil, *Searching for Explanations: How the Internet Inflates Estimates of Internal Knowledge*, Journal of Experimental Psychology, Vol. 144, No. 3, 2015.

⁹⁵ Umberto Eco, *La cultura è anche capacità di filtrare le informazioni*, Athenet. La rivista dell'Università di Pisa, 2004.

and extremists to weaken trust in institutions making everyone too fractured and paralysed to act by "mudding the waters" and creating a cyberspace too noisy and confusing where any reasonable and constructive proposal has no chance to make an impact.

The loss of information gatekeepers has not only opened up more space for truth and dissent, but also has destroyed the barrier that blocked misinformation and disinformation. Globalisation has conveyed more interest towards local communities and local information, in a time where local news outlets were experiencing a troubled transition to digitalization.⁹⁶ That has opened fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation operations. Russia, for example, has taken advantage of the situation creating hundreds of fake local media brands in the US or sharing fake local information in many European countries.⁹⁷

3.2 Globalization and Identity Crisis

Technology has been the driving force of any globalization wave in history, but it sped up its pace from the XIX century, when four industrial revolutions have taken place: in the first, steam power mechanized production; in the second electric power was used to create mass production; the third used electronics and information technology to automate production. The fourth is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres.⁹⁸

The speed of technology advancements has sped up globalization and completely reshaped the world, making it operate differently. This has happened so fast that institutions or society were not able to keep up. After decades of globalisation, the distribution of planetary wealth has successfully grown beyond the authority of national governments.⁹⁹

The nation-state system seems no more able to withstand the countervailing forces of the XXI century, being incapable to exert influence over human circumstance. The political structures built in the XX century are literally drowning in an ocean of deregulated finance, autonomous technology, religious militancy and great-power rivalry.¹⁰⁰

The international order as-we-know-it became universal after the First World War, when the new principle of "national self-determination" prevailed over others, in that first experiment of international regulatory organization known as "Société des Nations". The nation-state system is under distress as a result of the demolition of the old idea of the international society, with a rising concern, by an increasing number of people, that the system is unable to offer a plausible, viable future. The structure of post-war state possessed a unique level of control over domestic economy, as capital could not move unchecked across borders and foreign

⁹⁶ Alberto Alesina, Enrico Spolaore, *The Size of Nations*, MIT Press, 2003.

⁹⁷ Zeynep Tufekci, *How social media...*

⁹⁸ Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond*, *Global Agenda*, World Economic Forum, 14 January 2016.

⁹⁹ Dov Seidman, *The Moral Imperative of Modern Leadership*, *Fortune-Time Global Forum*, 2 December 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Rana Dasgupta, *The demise of the Nation State*, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2018.

currency speculation was negligible compared to today. This allowed governments to channel revenues from taxation into national development.¹⁰¹

The idea of nation-state is relatively recent. Its widespread adoption can be traced back to mid XIX century. At that time, liberal theorists viewed the establishment of nation-states as the best solution to keep together a heterogeneous society composed of different races, cultures and ideologies. At the end of the century, as major ethnic conflicts began to arise, the need for larger markets to absorb the newly developed mass production required enlarged countries. Patriotism was used then to unify citizens against outsiders, while colonialism was used to secure resource and provide breathing space to economies.¹⁰²

Two major developments after the Second World War were the decolonization in Asia and Africa; and the dramatic increase in openness of international trade. Scholars believe that if states had retrenched themselves into protectionism as they did in the aftermath of the First World War, decolonization would probably have not occurred, as well as it would have been more difficult for former countries under Soviet control to break away in the 80s and ending up isolated in a protectionist world.¹⁰³

The strong will of eastern European countries to enter the European Union adds credence to this idea, where the trade flows have dramatically increased on the way to the enlargement and would had been harder in a world with higher barriers. In fact, while economic integration has progressed, regional identity became more and more vocal during the decades.¹⁰⁴

Canadian economist Michael Bordo has argued that “Globalization, in the sense of increased integration of international markets, has waxed and waned throughout history. Most recently, it thrived between the middle of the nineteenth century and World War I, languished and retreated until about 1970, and has thrived again since then”.¹⁰⁵

Scholars describe the period between mid-1800 and the First World War as one of the most significant globalization period in history, because of the wide overall market integration, the rise in voluntary migration numbers, and the size of capital investments.¹⁰⁶ The process of international integration began with the opening up of the world in the Age of Discovery in the sixteenth century, but the major spurt in globalization happened between 1815 and 1914, where trade grew by 3.5% each year, income grew 2.7%, while mass migration, no more

¹⁰¹ Rana Dasgupta, *The demise of...*

¹⁰² Alberto Alesina, Enrico Spolaore, Romain Wacziarg, *Economic Integration and Political Disintegration*, Nber Working paper, 1997.

¹⁰³ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1996.

¹⁰⁴ Alberto Alesina, Enrico Spolaore, Romain Wacziarg, *Economic Integration...*

¹⁰⁵ Barry Eichengreen, Michael D. Bordo, *Crises Now and Then: What Lessons from the Last Era of Financial Globalization*, NBER Working Paper No. 8716, January 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Michael D. Bordo, Barry Eichengreen, Douglas A. Irwin, *Is Globalization Today Really Different than Globalization a Hunderd Years Ago?*, NBER Working Paper No. 7195, June 1999.

composed by slaves or free settlers, grew from 300.000 per year between 1850 to 1880, to over one million between 1900 and 1910.¹⁰⁷

By the end of the XIX century, European nations have established some uniform attributes, like fiercely enforced state monopolies in areas such as defence, taxation, and law, which gave governments a complete control over national activities. This was possible because the Treaty of Westphalia¹⁰⁸ recognised the existing states making large-scale conquest difficult on the continent, but allowing the expansion into the rest of the world, thanks to technological innovations.

The process of nation-state building was part of a profound theological reorganization started with the Enlightenment and carried all over Europe by Napoleon army. The French Revolution, and before that the American Revolution, not only dethroned absolute monarchies, but also removed God as the immobile engine, absorbing its superlative attributes (omniscience and omnipotence) into the newly born state institutions, which became the foundation of the secular faith dedicated to develop, liberate and redeem mankind.¹⁰⁹

The spiritual and material development of citizen and nations hold its foundation on a moral promise that was expressed through spectacular state-run projects in the fields of education, healthcare and culture. During the decolonization that followed WW2, the European nation-state structure was exported everywhere, pushed by unprecedented decades of growth.

Current globalization wave has enabled unprecedented level of prosperity, rising hundreds of millions from poverty, but it rests on shaky pillars, as global markets are prone to instability, inefficiency and weak popular legitimacy. The Bretton Woods agreement allowed policy makers to focus on reconstruction and prosperity in a multilateral regime, permitting the countries that conquered independence to experience unprecedented levels of economic growth.

The continuous falling costs of transportation that followed the exploration era, with the invention of the steam engine, then the propulsion technology and the introduction of the Jet Aircraft in the 1950s, improved physical communication and technological advances in the realm of telecommunication, computing, satellites which has resulted in a more quick and efficient flow of information, contributing to a massive economic expansion and the so-called "global shrinkage" in terms of distances.¹¹⁰

Eventually, the Bretton Woods system eventually became unsustainable and came to an end, being superseded by a more ambitious agenda of economic liberalization and deep integration.

¹⁰⁷ Ronald Findlay, Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Commodity Market Integration, 1500-2000*, NBER Working Paper No. 8579, November 2001.

¹⁰⁸ The Peace of Westphalia (1648) brought to an end the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch and the German phase of the Thirty Years' War. Some scholars of international relations credit the treaties with providing the foundation of the modern state system and articulating the concept of territorial sovereignty.

¹⁰⁹ Rana Dasgupta, *The demise of...*

¹¹⁰ Vincent Cable, *What is International Economic Security?*, International Affairs, Vol. 71, No. 2, April 1995.

Instead of helping countries to recover from the economic shocks of the 70s, financial globalization fostered instability and generated inequality and insecurity.¹¹¹

In recent years the number of citizens saying globalisation has been good for their country has fallen precipitously. Prominent economists have spoken not against it, but in favour of creating new institutions and compensation mechanism, instead of relying on those created in 1944 for the Bretton Woods regime, to render globalization more fair, effective and sustainable.¹¹²

Information technologies have been regarded as potentially capable of building bridges and unite communities of people geographically separated. Paradoxically, they have also the power to fragment interaction and divide groups, making easier for people to screen out unwanted contact of information. The result is that geographic boundaries have been supplanted by digital boundaries that then are reflected into society.¹¹³

The effect is not merely a tendency for members to conform to the group average but a radicalization in which this average move toward extremes. Meanwhile the suppressed consequences of XX century world are erupting, cracking nations into fragments and forcing populations into post-national solidarities: roving tribal militias, ethnic and religious sub-states and super-states. The result is white supremacists and radical Islamists alike take up arms against contamination and corruption.¹¹⁴

This marks the limits of the national imagination and generates the dynamic of Disinformation. Nation-state narrative guarantees that if citizens recognise the chain of authority, everything will be all right, while disinformation destabilizes, disintegrates and disorients identity. It displaces aspirations with anger born of confusion and despair, destroying social cohesion.¹¹⁵

The new technological gatekeepers of social reality established a de-terrorialised form of citizenship, which is slowly replacing fundamental functions of the nation-state. Governments are perceived as controlled by outside forces with only a partial influence over national affairs, echoing the condition of world's poorest countries. This feeling of primitive vulnerability is terrifying the west, leaving populations shattered and bereft. As the idea of western nation as a universal home collapses, transnational tribal identities grow up as refuge.¹¹⁶

The rising of a new brand of apocalyptic nationalism, fascination for wall-building strongmen, xenophobia, irrational outbreaks of rage (especially against immigrants, the appointed scapegoats), and fanatical promises of restoration of a mythical nation golden age, are not the cures, but possible symptoms of a slow political and moral decay of nation-state concept,¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ For more info: <https://www.imf.org/external/about/histend.htm>

¹¹² Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox. Why Global Markets, States and Democracy can't Coexist*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010.

¹¹³ Marshall Van Alstyne, Erik Brynjolfsson, *Global Village or Cyberbalkans: Modeling and Measuring the Integration of Electronic Communities*, Management Science, Volume 51, Issue 6, June 2005.

¹¹⁴ Cass R. Sunstein, The Law of Group Polarization, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume10, Issue2, June 2002.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Paul Marshall, James Goodman, Didar Zowghi, Francesca da Rimini, *Disorder and the Disinformation Society: The Social Dynamics of Information, Networks and Software*, Routledge, 2015.

¹¹⁶ Rana Dasgupta, *The demise of...*

¹¹⁷ Rana Dasgupta, *The demise of...*

which has lost the power to engage its citizens into a national narrative, because such narrative has lost its coherence.¹¹⁸

The national narrative that allowed the integration of the masses into society has not been replaced by a new one that provides the demand for a protective enclosure to citizens who feel no longer incorporated into the political realm of a globalized and uncivil society.¹¹⁹

The libertarian dream of an international order managed by nation-states, is slowly succumbing to pristine hi-tech corporate systems, which have already assumed many functions previously associated with the state, and represent a vision for the future.¹²⁰

3.2.1 The Rise of Populism

The world economy is more globalised today than at any time in history, and that caused a political backlash. This is similar to what followed the previous wave of globalization, pushed by technological advances and trade liberalisation, at the end of the XIX century. At that time, with agricultural prices plummeting, countries raised protectionist trade barriers that soon spread to manufacturing. Mass migration brought a large number of people from Europe to South America and the US, the greatest receiver, which soon began to restrict immigration from an increasing number of countries.¹²¹

Of great interest from current perspective is the backlash against the Gold Standard.¹²² Being a financial globalization anchor, it was seen as to produce tight credit conditions and a deflationary effect on agricultural prices. Grievances from farmers created the first populist movement in the US, which put together farmers and miners against bankers, whom were viewed as beneficiaries of the Gold Standard. The populists were eventually defeated, but the contrast between cosmopolitan financial interests and nationalist groups moved to Europe, where it intensified in the interwar period.¹²³

In recent times, populism has taken a different political approach, not only targeting free trade, but directly EU institutions, perceived as intrusive in domestic policy and regulations. In fact, even Brexit advocates presented free trade as one of the advantages of leaving the EU.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Paul Marshall, James Goodman, Didar Zowghi, Francesca da Rimini, *Disorder and the Disinformation Society: The Social Dynamics of Information, Networks and Software*, Routledge, 2015.

¹¹⁹ Dani Rodrik, *Populism and the economics of globalization*, JFK School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, August 2017.

¹²⁰ Rana Dasgupta, *The demise of...*

¹²¹ Andrés Solimano, *International Migration in the Age of Crisis and Globalization: Historical and Recent Experiences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

¹²² Gold standard, monetary system in which the standard unit of currency is a fixed quantity of gold or is kept at the value of a fixed quantity of gold.

¹²³ Dani Rodrik, *Populism and the Economics of Globalization*, JFK School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, August 2017.

¹²⁴ Dani Rodrik, *Populism and...*

Globalisation has created great opportunities, helped the rapid transformation of poor countries, spurring growth and reducing poverty. However, it created domestic dualism that increased inequality, mostly between skilled vs unskilled workers, globally mobile professionals vs local producers, cities vs countryside, cosmopolitan vs communitarian, elites vs ordinary people. Naturally automation and digital technologies played a much greater role in accelerating de-industrialisation, but globalisation has been accused of having created an unfair system where only financiers and large corporation were taking advantage. As a consequence, the rise of populist parties has to be linked to anti-globalization sentiments, but those are not linked in principle with trade shocks, but with an emphasis on cultural, national, ethnic and religious identity of people against outside groups. So, if in the US Mexicans, Chinese and Muslims are attacked, in Europe are immigrants, in particular from Africa or Muslim countries, to be paired with “EU bureaucrats” to be identified as the external enemy.¹²⁵

Fears generated with economic anxiety, discontent and loss of legitimacy rarely come with policy perspectives, but are used for political mobilisation with arguments meant to resonate with their base. It is easier to mobilize people along the ethno-cultural line, when economic anxieties can be channelled against immigrants and refugees, presented as posing an unfair competition for jobs, and eroding welfare state benefits, reducing resources available for natives.¹²⁶

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama believes that globalization, the internet, automation, mass migration, the financial crisis, and the rapid changes in the international order have left people with a deep sense of being dismissed, where identity politics have become a “cheap substitute for serious thinking about how to reverse the 30-year trend in most liberal democracies toward greater socio-economic inequality”.¹²⁷

Among the causes for political polarisation, should be considered the effect of the end of the cold war, which dissolved the one global enemy, ending the cohesion created by the external threat. An identitarian self-perception has instead rose, shifting the focus from unifying values to group identities.¹²⁸

In this scenario, the left has concentrated on “promoting the interests of a wide variety of groups perceived as being marginalised,” whereas the right “has redefined itself as patriots who seek to protect traditional national identity, an identity that is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity or religion”.¹²⁹

In a globalised society where citizens are no more incorporated in political realm through trade unions, parties, and churches, the “national narratives” that allowed the masses to integrate into industrial society have not been replaced by anything stronger enough to rival against the

¹²⁵ Dani Rodrik, *Populism and...*

¹²⁶ Dani Rodrik, Sharun Mukand, *Why Illiberal Democracies Are on the Rise*, Huffington Post, 18 May 2015.

¹²⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

¹²⁸ David Blankenhorn, *The Top 14 Causes of Political Polarization*, The American Interest, 16 May 2018.

¹²⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The...*

populist ethno-nationalism. The strong demand for protective enclosure has created a path towards social authoritarianism and a ferocious critique of cultural liberalism.

The decline of support for traditional parties should be linked on the left, to trade unions reduced capacity to mobilise workers as an effect of de-industrialization; on the right to the growth of secularism that made Christian religious identity more private. These elements, combined with quick economic and social changes, created a fertile ground for populist parties able to attract alienated voters, who believe that their national identity is under threat from foreign cultures, distrust of elites, and a sense of exclusive nationalism.¹³⁰

Left-wing parties have tried ever since to stop the decline in support by gradually abandoning the multicultural celebration of difference in favour of reduced immigration policies.¹³¹ Right-wing mainstream parties have also seen their consensus being drained by populists, when they abandoned their advocacy for free market for a nativist protection of welfare state, reserved only for the "deserving", thus excluding immigrants and Muslims.¹³²

The hostility to Islam has been hidden behind ethno-cultural concerns, arguing that only a hard anti-Islamic stance could protect European traditional values from Muslim intolerance against homosexuality, Jews, secularists and women.¹³³ A series of crimes, like the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, the death threats against Danish cartoonists who published a series of cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad in 2005, the terroristic attack against the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and at the Bataclan theatre in 2015, helped keep Islam in the spotlight and was heavily exploited by populist parties.¹³⁴

Contrary to common belief, Europe has not experience a rising of populist parties in the last decades, but their success it is a pretty recent event. The definition itself is uncertain, as it fluctuated over the political spectrum since the XIX century. At that time, the political far-right lambasted industrial society, which had replaced traditional rural society. In the interwar period, urbanization was accused of being the cause of decadence and up-rootedness, against the purity of peasantry. In the post-industrial era, protest against globalization has replaced that against urbanisation.¹³⁵

Populism made its first appearance in a European election in the 1970s as an expression of opposition to welfare state, with the unexpected success of the Danish Fremskridtspartiet, which became the second largest political party in 1973, before collapsing. From then on, populists have considered political change as decadence from which only the "common people" can restore the nation *grandeur* and cast aside the "corrupted elites".

¹³⁰ Martin A. Schain, *Shifting Tides: Radical-Right Populism and Immigration Policy in Europe and the United States*, Migration Policy Institute, August 2018.

¹³¹ An example is represented by the Danish Social Democratic party that went so far in that direction that it supported the controversial 2016 law allowing the confiscation of valuables from asylum seekers.

¹³² Cas Mudde, *Why Copying the Populist Right isn't Going to Save The Left*, The Guardian, 14 May 2019.

¹³³ Sasha Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back to Where You Came From: The Backlash Against Immigration and the Fate of Western Democracy*, Bold Type Books, 2017.

¹³⁴ Eric Kaufmann, *Good Fences Make Good Politics*, Foreign Affairs, September/October 2018.

¹³⁵ Jean-Yves Camus, Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe*, Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2017.

Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde defined populism as "an ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups - the pure people - versus - the corrupt elite - and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people".¹³⁶

During the decades, the opposition shifted from being against welfare to a critique of multiculturalism, seen as a menace to identity purity. When the French Front National was established in the early 1970s, its aim was to block the alliance of Socialist and Communist that allegedly would have brought the country under Soviet influence, but no mention was made about immigration, or about Islam.¹³⁷

The first to raise the Identitarian issue was the British Conservative party in 1968 by what it became known as the Rivers of Blood speech by Enoch Powell, who claimed that "Great Britain would face civil war if it did not manage to control the flow of non-white immigration", stating the ethno-cultural incompatibility of migrants and the necessity of an immediate repatriation.¹³⁸ In the same period, under the slogan "Keep Britain White", Colin Jordan fabricated the immigrationist conspiracy of the genocide of the white race, in an attempt to force moderate parties to compete with the far-right on the theme, presenting themselves as a movement defending common people and traditional values.¹³⁹ In the same period, Danish and Norwegian populist parties moved from an anti-elitist protest to ethnic-nativism.

Two main events shaped the international scenario and resulted in boosting populist parties to a larger audience: the terroristic attack to the Twin Towers in 2001, and the recession that followed the 2008 financial crisis.

In the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn co-opted the debate on integration of immigrants, affirming that Muslim immigration was a menace to the social consensus between Christian religious groups and secularists.¹⁴⁰ Some years after, Geert Wilders organised his political message on rejecting elected officials to protect moral values, national security, against dual nationality, and with a sheer anti-Muslimism, anti-immigrant policy, on the basis of a supposed contract between the common people and the elites. This was echoed by French "Front National", which claimed to represent "the France of the forgotten" or "the France of the invisible that cannot speak".¹⁴¹

The root causes of the growing of these movements lay no more on tax-revolt, which could even entail an inter-European antagonism (Luxembourg vs French workers; Swiss vs Italian workers), but on hedonist national security identity, that moved towards identity politics.

¹³⁶ Cas Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in *Government and Opposition*, Volume 39, Issue 4, autumn 2004.

¹³⁷ Jean-Yves Camus, Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right...*

¹³⁸ Enoch Powell, *Rivers of Blood Speech*, the Telegraph, 6 November 2007.

¹³⁹ Paul Jackson, *Colin Jordan and Britain's Neo-Nazi Movement (A Modern History of Politics and Violence)*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Sam Cherribi, *In the House of War: Dutch Islam Observed*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹⁴¹ Lucie Soullier, *A Brachay, plus de 90 % des votes pour Le Pen : "on n'est pas des assassins, juste des oubliés"*, Le Monde, 8 May 2017.

Through a mythicized representation of the working class and the industrial era, populist movements are critical of the moral decay of the postmodern individualism and the rapid transformation of society brought by globalisation, seeing it as a consequence of "islamisation" or "Zionism", ironically creating a postmodern behaviour though movements that are openly against modernity.¹⁴²

In societies where the educational level has risen considerably within a few decades, the increased demand for participation in the political process arrives at the very moment when the European space has reached a post democratic phase. Populist success does not merely indicate the crisis of multicultural society, but rather the desire of belonging to a "community" that stands together, where the notions of equality or freedom are not mobilised. This cannot be swept aside in the name of an "open society" or adaptation to a globalized society, and even less condemn it as a "fascist threat to democracy".

Populists bring their electorate into politics that are interclassist, where anti-immigration policies are provided in exchange of their social demand, producing a new bloc of ethno-liberalism. They have exploited the falsehood spread by mainstream parties and journalists that their rise was mainly about disparity of wealth and power, to play the role of the underdog challenging the established elites, thus avoiding being confronted on the ethno-cultural agenda and its subsequent accusation of racism.¹⁴³

Immigration has played a key role, as it did not clearly divide among the left-right line, rather separating globalists, culturally cosmopolitan and supportive of free movement, from nationalists, who instead are more concerned about cultural boundaries and traditional nation-state characteristics.¹⁴⁴ The latter remains a crucial part also of left-wing coalitions. Over the last decades, leftist parties have slowly moved away from economic inequality to cultural issues, in the effort to attract those university-educated, cosmopolitan liberals dubbed "anywheres" by British writer David Goodhart, opening up a space for populists' right to appeal to the working class on ethno-cultural grounds.¹⁴⁵

In recent years, anti-establishment parties have established themselves as defenders of the nation against the threats posed by foreigners and corrupt elites. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and 2018 Italian General Election were a manifestation of this larger trend.

The fear among white voters that their culture and identities were under threat is the main engine that moves populist parties. The migrant crisis and the wave of refugees coming from a war-torn Syria represented a boost for right-wing populists.

In 2016, Ukip leader Nigel Farage, threatened Britons with a mass Muslim invasion if the country would have not left the EU, while Trump adopted, after several attempts, a ban for people coming from Muslim countries, as promised during the campaign.

¹⁴² Jean-Yves Camus, Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right...*

¹⁴³ Jean-Yves Camus, Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right...*

¹⁴⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The...*

¹⁴⁵ David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, London, 2017.

Populism derive its strength from ethno-cultural anxiety, as a growing number of people in the west fear an erosion of the connection between their community and the shared ancestry of their homelands. The widespread conviction that populist voters are those left behind by globalisation is a comforting illusion for mainstream parties, although anti-establishment parties are gaining popularity also in country less affected by the economic crisis, demonstrating that traditional economic policies such as redistribution and job growth have proven not sufficient to stop populist growth.¹⁴⁶

The current process of radicalisation of intergroup conflict is highlighted by the increasing amount of population that vote in accordance with their identity motivation. The peculiarity of this process is that identity motivation is less and less positive and more and more oppositional and negative.¹⁴⁷

The strengthening of these "niches of belongingness" can be seen as an act of searching for identity cohesion aimed at fulfilling the basic need of making more representable and understandable an increasingly chaotic world. From this perspective, Brexit can be recognised as a semiotic solution to the identity crisis, a way of restoring sense of meaningfulness, even if the solution is worse than the problem it addresses. European Union countries are experiencing a deep socio-political turbulence that has fragmented social cohesion, decreased solidarity and partnership among European countries, fuelled ideological and religious radicalisation, and enhanced the rise of ultra-right parties in parallel with the growing political paralysis of European governance.¹⁴⁸

The dramatic radicalisation of intergroup conflicts has increased people feeling that their community is threatened by an external enemy, whose nature may vary, being the political elites, migrants, other European countries, welfare free riders, Muslim communities, etc. The constant feeling of being "under attack from a threatening other" generated a socio-political dynamic that concerned people system of values and worldviews, which quickly shifted towards intolerance and radicalization. This phenomenon can be seen as a consequence of decades of globalization, however their effects have spread at an astonishingly speed, bringing a widespread instability over Europe.¹⁴⁹

Twenty years ago, the very idea of quitting the EU or electing for higher offices leaders who were openly xenophobic or Nazi-apologist was unthinkable. For this reason, an increasing number of scholars are drawing parallels between the current socio-political situation and the dynamics happening in the period before the Second World War.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Eric Kaufmann, *Good Fences...*

¹⁴⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Sergio Salvatore, Viviana Fini, Terri Mannarini, Giuseppe Alessandro Veltri, *Symbolic universes between present and future of Europe. First results of the map of European societies' cultural milieu*, PLoS ONE, n. 13(1), March 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Sergio Salvatore, Viviana Fini, *Symbolic universes...*

¹⁵⁰ Sergio Salvatore, Viviana Fini, *Symbolic universes...*

The leaders of the new authoritarian populisms are aware that they cannot really control the national economies, now hostage to foreign investors, global agreements, and international finance. Everyone promises a national cultural purification as a way to world political power.

The feeling of having enough of democracy today has a logic and a particular context in many ways. The spread of the internet and social media in increasingly more ample segments of the population, combined with the possibility of mobilisation, propaganda, identity building and search for similar ones formed by the network, has generated the dangerous illusion that it is possible to find peers, allies, friends, collaborators, converts and colleagues regardless of who we are and what we want. Every single nation-state has lost ground in the battle for the defence of minimal economic sovereignty.

The spread of human rights has guaranteed a minimum recognition to the requests of strangers, foreigners and migrants in practically every country in the world, even in the face of hostile welcome and harsh conditions of permanence. These aspects have sharpened the general intolerance for the regular processes, the deliberative rationality and the patience required by democratic systems. Brexit is just the latest version of a long and constant debate on identity. Resentment towards migration management is exacerbated by the feeling that EU membership entails a drastic loss of well-being. These are desperate attempts to regain some economic sovereignty.

The debate on migrants is an excellent example of how questions of economic sovereignty are translated into questions of cultural sovereignty. These translation and transposition operations are at the root of the development of right-wing populisms in the world.¹⁵¹

The identity crisis has been caused by the fear of losing the collective existence, whereas it is whiteness, Christianity or the idyllic idea of rural country, which provided the ethnic character of the nation with its language, myths, and tradition. The fast changes in society, combined with the shrinking demographic weight of west's ethnic majorities, have created the idea that such identity was linked to the nation, but with a particular ethnic group. The solution is neither to dismiss these concerns nor to promise a time travel toward idealised and more homogenous times, but to reassure ethnic majorities that their identity will persist even in a fast-changing society.¹⁵²

According to a recent study, the paradoxical effect of this spread of democracy in the non-Western world is that citizens, in many apparently solid democracies have not only become more critical towards their political leaders, but also more cynical than the value of democracy as a political system, less confident in the fact that their actions can influence public policies and more eager to express their consent to authoritarian alternatives.¹⁵³

What we see today in the West is not a temporary setback in a progressive development and not even a form of fear, but an inversion of tendency. The most dramatic feature is not the

¹⁵¹ Arjun Appadurai, *L'Insofferenza verso la democrazia*, La Grande Regressione, Feltrinelli, 2018.

¹⁵² Eric Kaufmann, *Good Fences...*

¹⁵³ Roberto Stefan Foa, Yascha Mounk, *The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect*, Journal of Democracy, n. 27, July 2016.

appearance of authoritarian regimes, but the fact that many of the democratic ones are changing nature. Populism is not the product of a romantic nationalism, as it could be a century ago. On the contrary, it is fuelled not only by the upheavals caused by the technological revolution, but also by the demographic projections that foreshadow both a reduction in the weight of their countries and movements towards their countries. Demography pushes Europeans to imagine a world in which their culture is disappearing, while the technological revolution opens up a world in which their works will disappear.¹⁵⁴

The transformation of public opinion from revolutionary force to reactionary force explains the rise of right-wing populist parties. The current political disorder in Europe cannot be reduced to a revolt of the economic victims of globalization. The most solid argument in support of the view that it does not depend entirely on the economy is Poland: for a decade the Poles have enjoyed impressive economic growth, prosperity and even less social inequality. However, in 2015 they voted for a reactionary. Globalisation has turned the world into a village, but this village lives on global comparisons, where people do not compare their lives with their neighbours, but with that of the richest inhabitants on the planet. Democracy is a mechanism of inclusion but also of exclusion. What we are witnessing is the emergence of majority regimes in which the majority transforms the state into a private possession as a response to the competitive pressure of the globalised world. The paradox of liberal democracy is that it has made citizens feel freer but less powerful.¹⁵⁵

Populists' fascination is directly connected with their unambiguous promise of victory, where the separation of powers is no longer perceived as democratic control, but as an alibi by which the elites can break electoral promises. The conviction of speaking for the majority makes it difficult for them to accept electoral defeat.¹⁵⁶

Nationalist's movements are not only voted by the poor, but also by those who fall back into the lower middle class. These people did not become poor, but they were made unsafe. They fear decline, claim a status that they have lost, as workers and as supporters of the family. They are unhappy with the way the world has developed.¹⁵⁷

The loss of power of the old establishments towards emerging groups of outsiders arouses an exasperated resistance, a very unrealistic desire to restore the old order, not only for economic reasons but also because such groups feel humiliated in their consideration of themselves.¹⁵⁸

Middle-aged people with average qualifications and income seem to be particularly sensitive. Even if the studies are still in its infancy, these people are searching for hate messages online, sharing them as they feel disliked and exploited (by elites, by globalization, by women, by immigrants). They have the impression of being marginalized, of belonging to a minority in their own country to which no one listens. The fear of losing one's material and cultural status thus

¹⁵⁴ Juraj Buzalka, *Europeanisation and post-peasant populism in Eastern Europe*, Europe-Asia Studies, Volume 60, Issue 5, 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Ivan Krastev, *Futuri Maggioritari*, La Grande regressione, Feltrinelli, 2018.

¹⁵⁶ Ivan Krastev, *Futuri Maggioritari...*

¹⁵⁷ Carlos Hanimann, *Egal was die linke macht*, Die wochenzeitung, 47/2016, 24 November 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Norbert Elias, *Il Processo di Civilizzazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1983.

becomes the engine of resentment, of negative instincts, of identity closures and of conspiracy theories.¹⁵⁹

Populist message is strong because it is inclusive, simple and comprehensible, offering solutions to fears that it helped generate. Identitarian narrative is built through contrast, going against everything that can put in discussion its very existence, from multiculturalism, globalization, to freedom of the press.

3.3 How Algorithms are Shaping the Information Environment

"Platforms and algorithms that promised to improve our lives can actually magnify our worst human tendencies. Rogue actors and even governments have taken advantage of user trust to deepen divisions, incite violence and even undermine our shared sense of what is true and what is false. [...] Our own information, from the everyday to the deeply personal, is being weaponised against us with military efficiency. [...] (Algorithms) serve up increasingly extreme content, pounding our harmless preferences into hardened convictions". (Tim Cook, 2018)

Social media have become one of the main sources of information, capable of reaching its users even indirectly, when they are browsing for other purposes. In recent years their algorithms have been purposefully used to distribute manipulated contents aimed at polarize and influence public perception. As side effect, trust in mainstream media plummeted, while alternative news ecosystems fuelled by extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial content have flourished.¹⁶⁰

Algorithms are central in spreading manipulated content, as they can be purposefully exploited to distribute polarizing political content. Based on preferences and behaviour, highly personalised algorithms select what information to show in the news feed, creating a powerful filter bubble effect, where disinformation spread fast among homogeneous groups.¹⁶¹

Algorithms deliver customized news and recommendations based on past viewing habits or purchase of product and service. They are programmed to spark interest and on the long run, lead to a more focused interaction, as all new information will be a function of past activity and user's preference and connections becomes path dependent. The more evident effect is the hardening and intensification of pre-existing biases, where information cascade of unchallenged evidence and oversampled arguments lead members to adopt group views, being

¹⁵⁹ Oliver Nachtwey, *Decivilizzazione e Tendenze Regressive*, La grande regressione, Feltrinelli, 2018.

¹⁶⁰ Michela Del Vicario, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Fabio Petroni, Antonio Scala, *The Spreading of Misinformation Online*, PNAS, n. 113(3), January 2016.

¹⁶¹ Vidya Narayanan, Vlad Barash, *Polarization, Partisanship...*

unwilling or unable to construct persuasive counterarguments. This tendency to conform feeds radicalization towards more and more extreme positions.¹⁶²

Since the early days of Internet, it was easy to create communities with like-minded individuals, connecting people dispersed geographically. In this way, for example, particle physicists, Star Trek fans, gamers, music enthusiasts, or extra-terrestrial "welcomers" have used the internet to find each other, swap information, and stoke each other's passions. Their heated discussion never reached a critical mass, although, their interactions might have polarized their views and amplified their individual preferences.¹⁶³

Online interactions can also facilitate a complete detachment of individuals or groups from their geographic neighbourhoods, as radicalism is fostered by tribalism and xenophobia. Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas Friedman once observed that: "When you might have thought you were all alone with your extreme views, the Internet puts you together with a community of people from around the world who hate all the things and people you do. You can scrap the BBC and just get your news from those websites that reinforce your own stereotypes".¹⁶⁴

Online platforms algorithms, with their increased connectivity and improved filtering, were designed to connect geographically separated people and help them locate interesting or useful resources; instead it led to less integration, fragmented interaction and divided groups. Geographic boundaries have been supplanted by digital boundaries, where people spend more time on special interests and screen out unwanted contact. Paradoxically, the technology that had the potential to bridge gaps and unite communities, have saturated the human capacity for information processing¹⁶⁵ creating as result virtual knowledge spaces in an increasing number of digitally divided groups.¹⁶⁶

Personalised algorithms were created to provide relevant information to users confronted with information overload. Paradoxically, instead of improving decision-making, personalisation algorithms, not being able to "replicate a spontaneous discovery of new things, ideas and options",¹⁶⁷ have reduce the diversity of information creating "echo-chambers" devoid of consolatory information, which are considered as anomalies against the profiled interests of the subject.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Marshall Van Alstyne, Erik Brynjolfsson, *Global Village or Cyberbalkans: Modeling and Measuring the Integration of Electronic Communities*, Management Science, Volume 51, Issue 6, June 2005.

¹⁶³ Cass R. Sunstein, *The Law of Group...*

¹⁶⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, *Global Village Idiocy*, The New York Times, 12 May 2002.

¹⁶⁵ Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Man, Social and Rational: Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in a Social Setting*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1957.

¹⁶⁶ Marshall Van Alstyne, Erik Brynjolfsson, *Global Village...*

¹⁶⁷ Sue Newell, Marco Marabelli, *Strategic Opportunities (and Challenges) of Algorithmic Decision-Making: A Call for Action on the Long-Term Societal Effects of 'Datification'*, Journal of Strategic Information Systems, March 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Brent Mittelstadt, Patrick Allo, Mariarosaria Taddeo, *The Ethics of Algorithms: Mapping the Debate*, Big Data & Society, Vol. 3(2), February 2017.

Online platforms business model relies on pushing contents that generates engagement, allowing them to sell this "attention" to advertisers.¹⁶⁹ Traditional media has frequently relied on sensationalistic contents, but only with the advent of personalised algorithms that can measure what content best engages each user individually, that they could be weaponised.¹⁷⁰

Internet platforms have been built on a business model that monetizes attention through advertising, using complex statistical models to enhance engagement. However, the easiness of getting ads revenues on platforms, have not only provided a powerful and inexpensive publishing tool, but also a tool that actively promote dissemination.¹⁷¹

Recommendation algorithms contribute to the propagation of false information. Even relying on the same data, slightly differences in the algorithms may produce different recommendations. Online platforms are designed to maximize the time spent and tend to weight more specific contents rather than comments (pro and against) to it. As a result, AI will favour that specific content, giving as a result an incentive to create additional material on the same tone. The unintended consequence is that eventually false information will be widely recommended, and the large amount of content will make it appear as more credible.¹⁷²

In the beginning, the financial incentive to create content through advertising revenue have driven a large number of users to generate political clickbait fake stories, then algorithms have been exploited using military hybrid-warfare strategies. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the "inventor" of Internet, warned that "People are being distorted by very finely trained AI that figure out how to distract them. We have these dark ads that target and manipulate me and then vanish because I cannot bookmark them. This is not democracy. This is putting who gets selected into the hands of the most manipulative companies out there. We are so used to these systems being manipulated that people just think that is how the internet works."¹⁷³

Propaganda has benefitted from internet platforms to efficiently disseminate to a large number of people. What was before an exclusive domain of states, became available to a wide variety of individuals and groups, and through anonymity, it provided the plausible deniability to present propaganda as if were not produced by state actors. Audience targeting based on big data analytics and a strategic manipulation of algorithms has provided a more efficient dissemination.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Lucia Vesnić-Alujević, Miriam Stehling, Ana Jorge, Lidia Marôpo, *Algorithms and Intrusions: Emergent Stakeholder Discourses on the Co-option of Audiences' Creativity and Data*, The Future of Audiences, Springer International Publishing, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Zeynep Tufekci, *Russian Meddling Is a Symptom, Not the Disease*, The New York Times, 3 October 2018.

¹⁷¹ David M.J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, *The Science of Fake News*, Science, vol. 359 issue 6380, March 2018.

¹⁷² Guillaume Chaslot, *How YouTube's A.I. Boosts Alternative Facts*, Medium, March 2017.

¹⁷³ Olivia Solon, *Tim Berners-Lee on the future of the web: 'The system is failing'*, the Guardian, 16 November 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Gillian Bolsover, Philip Howard, *Computational propaganda and political big data: moving toward a more critical research agenda*, Big Data, Oxford Internet Institute, vol. 5 n. 4, Oxford, 2017.

Algorithms have the power to shape what people watch, which skims and ranks billions of results with the purpose of keeping the user on the platform.¹⁷⁵ The most interesting and overlooked example is YouTube and its 1.5 billion users in the world. Insiders describe its algorithms as the "largest scale and most sophisticated industrial recommendation system in existence", which are one of the best kept secret formulas; it has turned out to be a main engine for spreading disinformation. Researchers have demonstrated that YouTube recommendations were not neutral during the US presidential race, pushing more anti-Hillary videos containing the most extreme content only because the algorithm have figured out that edgy and hateful content was more engaging.¹⁷⁶ According to a recent study, the impact of algorithms in shaping the content and the perception of people is high, in particular among those who have not already made-up their mind on a specific topic, and can lead towards choices that would have not been made.¹⁷⁷

Platforms algorithms are designed to maximise engagement,¹⁷⁸ whether this is used by product retailers, politicians or scammers, and does not make the difference among neo-moms, sport-enthusiasts or neo-Nazis, because their customers are not their users.¹⁷⁹ Online platforms have thrived under the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which offers complete immunity for false or defamatory content published by others.¹⁸⁰

In the case of Facebook, users were profiled not only with their behaviour on the platform (clicks, likes or shared content), but also collecting browsing histories or purchasing "external" data like financial information or offline data acquired through geolocalization. Facebook seems also able to create "shadow profiles" of non-users, using data from friends and acquaintances.¹⁸¹

Google is an advertising broker that benefits from how long people stay on its platforms, primarily YouTube. According to a recent investigation by the Wall Street Journal, YouTube "fed far-right or far-left content to users who watched relatively mainstream news source" as its algorithms have concluded that people attention is drawn by extreme or incendiary content (e.g. users who searched for information on flu-vaccine were recommended anti-vaccination conspiracy videos).¹⁸²

Micro targeting has been used for electoral campaigns. Two notable examples are Obama Presidential Campaigns, and Cambridge Analytical. Both used data from users, but in two completely different ways. The Obama campaign collected data with a specific app, which was

¹⁷⁵ Paul Covington, Jay Adams, Emre Sargin, *Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations*, RecSys, September 2016.

¹⁷⁶ Brent Mittelstadt, Patrick Allo, Mariarosaria Taddeo, *The Ethics of...*

¹⁷⁷ Paul Lewis, *Fiction is outperforming reality: how YouTube's algorithm distorts truth*, The Guardian, 2 February 2018.

¹⁷⁸ Eytan Bakshy, *Solomon Messing Lada A. Adamic, Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook*, Science, Vol. 348, Issue 6239, Jun 2015.

¹⁷⁹ Zeynep Tufekci, *Facebook's Ad Scandal Isn't a 'Fail,' It's a Feature*, The New York Times, 23 September 2017.

¹⁸⁰ Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act created a federal immunity to any cause of action that would make ISPs liable for information originating with a third-party user of the service.

¹⁸¹ Zeynep Tufekci, *Facebook's Surveillance Machine*, The New York Times, 19 March 2018.

¹⁸² Zeynep Tufekci, *YouTube, the Great Radicalizer*, The New York, 10 March 2018.

meant for support, donation, and organization. Activists were asked permission to scan their photos, friends' lists, and news feeds. This data was then matched with offline data and used to identify voters who were likely to vote for Obama, but not willing to register and vote. This information was then passed to activists, who then knew who to campaign.¹⁸³

Cambridge Analytica on the other hand, collected data through a "personality quiz" app, without informing users that their data would have been used for political campaigns. Data collected was matched with psychological profiles, offline data, to micro target people with ads that would push them in a certain direction. As explained by Chris Wylie¹⁸⁴ "Cambridge Analytica was data harvesting programs where we would pull data from users of apps and all of their friend networks and run that data through algorithms that could profile their personality traits and other psychological attributes so that we would know exactly what kind of information we would need to seed on to online platforms to exploit mental vulnerabilities that our algorithms showed that they had".¹⁸⁵

The role of social media for data-gathering and shaping perceptions has been recognised several times. Donald Trump once stated that he probably owes its success to Twitter, while Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte heavily relied on Facebook to crash its opponents.¹⁸⁶ In France, the "gilets jaunes" protest has been fuelled by a small change in the algorithms from Facebook that, according to experts, together with the use of automated accounts,¹⁸⁷ allowed the protest and the rage to spread more quickly.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Manuela Tobias, Comparing Facebook data use by Obama, Cambridge Analytica, PolitiFact, 22 March 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Christopher Wylie is a Canadian data consultant who previously worked at Cambridge Analytica. In 2018, he released a cache of documents describing the secret workings behind Cambridge Analytica.

¹⁸⁵ For more info: Bethania Palma, *Did the Obama Campaign Employ the Same Tactics as Cambridge Analytica?*, Snopes, 22 March 2018; Marty Swant, *A Researcher's Quiz App Deceptively Harvested Data for Political Research*, Facebook Alleges, AdWeek, 17 March 2018; Lulu Garcia-Navarro, *How Does Cambridge Analytica Flap Compare With Obama's Campaign Tactics?*, NPR, 25 March 2018; Morwenna Ferrier, *Christopher Wylie: The fashion industry was crucial to the election of Donald Trump*, The Guardian, 29 November 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Angela Giuffrida, *The populist social media playbook: the battle for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram*, The Guardian, 17 December 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Alto Data Analytics, *Public Digital Sphere Analysis of Yellow Vests Movement*.

¹⁸⁸ Angela Giuffrida, *Revealed: how Italy's populists used Facebook to win power*, The Guardian, 17 December 2018.

4. Russian "Active Measures"

Psychological operations in foreign countries is nothing new, as it has been for a long time a tool in the arsenal of states. Approximately 2000 years ago, Chinese master strategist Sun Tzu, dedicated an entire chapter of his manual "The Art of War" describing how "expendable agents, after creating disinformation and deceptions to be planted in the field, direct that our agents know of the disinformation and deceptions, and spread the disinformation and deceptions to enemy agents".¹⁸⁹ Technological advances and the pervasiveness of Internet in shaping public opinion dramatically changed the scope, directness and the scale of activity of external interference. Cyberspace is being used as a powerful weapon to destabilize target countries through manipulated content disseminated thanks to the high connectivity, low latency, low cost of entry, multiple distribution points without intermediaries, and a total disregard for physical distance or national borders.¹⁹⁰

Foreign actors with malicious intent can use the peculiar structure of cyberspace to plant and disseminate fake stories, manipulate online content, also using an organised army of "paid trolls" (each controlling multiple online profiles) to distract and disinform public opinion, trashing the debate with "alternative facts"¹⁹¹, with the aim to disorient and corroborate a sense of doubt among the public, or shape target audience on a specific issue.¹⁹²

According to A. Kovalev and M. Bodner,¹⁹³ Russian meddling with western democracies is not a new phenomenon. Technology has always been used to spread disinformation since the Cold War period. At that time, they were referred as "active measures", described as "malign influence operations were well integrated into Soviet policy and involved virtually every element of the Soviet party and state structure, not only the KGB". In the 1970s, KGB had approximately 15000 officers working on psychological and disinformation warfare, with estimated \$4bn of annual expenditure.¹⁹⁴ Soviet specialists used any mean possible, from official newspapers, to radio stations, embassies, and foreign communist parties to disseminate fake stories in a coordinated fashion. Each campaign was organised in three distinct branches: "black propaganda", tasked to create forgeries and spread rumours; "white propaganda", broadcasting stories through official media organizations; "grey propaganda" that disseminated disinformation through international front organizations.¹⁹⁵ Active measures, focusing on target audience, sought to exploit any pre-existing fissures to polarize western democracies,¹⁹⁶ and attempting multiple times to influence elections in Western Europe, like in 1983 with the massive disinformation campaign orchestrated against then Chancellor Helmut

¹⁸⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Barnes&Nobel, 2011.

¹⁹⁰ Fabio Rugge, *Mind Hacking: information warfare in the cyber age*, ISPI analysis, no. 319, January 2018.

¹⁹¹ As referred to by Donald Trump spokesperson, Kellyanne Conway, on CNN in 2017.

¹⁹² Fabio Rugge, *Mind Hacking*...

¹⁹³ Alexey Kovalev & Matthew Bodner, *The Secrets of Russia's Propaganda War, Revealed*, The Moscow Times, Mar. 1, 2017.

¹⁹⁴ Approximately \$8.7bn in today money.

¹⁹⁵ Alexey Kovalev & Matthew Bodner, *The Secrets of*...

¹⁹⁶ Colonel Rolf Wagenbreth, long-time head of active measures operations for the East German Stasi, reportedly said, "A powerful adversary can only be defeated through a sophisticated, methodical, careful, and shrewd effort to exploit even the smallest 'cracks' between our enemies and within their elites."

Kohl.¹⁹⁷ During the Cold War, several bogus stories were fabricated and disseminated by the Soviet Union, like the CIA direct involvement in President Kennedy assassination in 1963,¹⁹⁸ or US scientists that created the HIV virus¹⁹⁹ as a biological weapon in 1983.²⁰⁰

According to experts, today Russia uses malign influence operation to achieve their strategic ends, which include security services, TV stations, private and public companies, think tanks, social and religious groups, but mainly social media and internet trolls. Disinformation campaigns are organised to discredit politicians, independent media or democratic institutions, while cultural, religious, and political groups are used as a tool to disrupt social cohesion and infiltrate decision-making bodies.²⁰¹

According to the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy, since 2004 the Russian government has used cyber-attacks, disinformation, and financial influence campaigns to meddle with the internal affairs of most European countries. Russian methods are largely determined by the correlation between the strength of each country institution and its vulnerability to Russian influence. The strategy changes depending on the targeted country: towards former Soviet controlled countries, Russia acts to exert influence over pliant governments or weaken pro-Western leaders, in the rest of Europe it primarily seeks to undermine NATO and the EU, while amplifying existing political and social discord.²⁰² The activities to destabilize European governments often start with attempts to build influence and exploit divisions at local level. This includes developing affiliations to like-minded political parties and Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs), establishing deep financial relationship, and providing ready-to-use propaganda to local media.²⁰³

According to US State Department, "Russia effort to influence elections and referendums in Europe includes overt and covert support for far-left and far-right political parties, funding from groups and NGOs, and making small, low-profile investments in key economic sectors to build political influence over time. Its tactics focus on exploiting internal discord in an effort to break consensus on the importance of core institutions".²⁰⁴ Russia has adopted a sophisticated tactic in cultivating relationships and establishing cooperation agreements with some of the more mainstream far-right parties in Europe,²⁰⁵ which include regular meetings and collaboration

¹⁹⁷ Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Strategy to Derail US INF Deployment: Soviet Active Measures in the United States, 1986-87*, reprinted in the Congressional Record, 133 Cong. Rec. H34262 (Dec. 9, 1987) (statement of Rep. C.W. Bill Young).

¹⁹⁸ Gordon Corera, *Cold War fake news: Why Russia lied over Aids and JFK*, BBC News, 1 April 2017.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Boghardt, *Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign*, *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Dec. 2009.

²⁰⁰ Fletcher Schoen & Christopher Lamb, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference*, *Institute for National Strategic Studies*, n. 20, vol. 34, June 2012.

²⁰¹ Mark Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe*, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Aug. 2017.

²⁰² U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Efforts by the Russian Federation to Undermine Elections in Europe and Eurasia*, Pursuant to the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-44), Nov. 7, 2017.

²⁰³ Rachel Oswald, *Reality Rocked: Info Wars Heat Up Between U.S. and Russia*, CQ, June 12, 2017.

²⁰⁴ Committee on Foreign Relations of the USA, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security*, 10 January 2018.

²⁰⁵ In details: Austria (Freedom Party), Hungary (Jobbik), Italy (Northern League), France (National Front), and Germany (AfD).

where suitable on economic, business and political projects, together with organizational, political, and media expertise assistance.²⁰⁶

Different narratives are also used to attract different groups: "European far-right nationalists are seduced by anti-EU and anti-establishment messages, with a combination of extreme nationalism, commitment to law-and-order, traditional family values that sometimes digress to anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, or anti-Islamic sentiments. On the other hand, far-left are brought in by tales of fighting US hegemony".²⁰⁷

According to C. Paul and M. Matthews, Russia usually employs two main external propaganda outlets: RT, which focuses on television news programming, and Sputnik, a radio and internet news network. They also target a diverse audience at the same time: far-right and far-left parties; anti-establishment movements; environmentalists; civil rights activists; extreme religious groups; and sometimes minority groups.²⁰⁸

In November 2016, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that disinformation operations in Europe aim at "distorting truths, provoking doubt, dividing Member states, engineering a strategic split between the European Union and its North American partners and paralyzing the decision-making process, discrediting the EU institutions and transatlantic partnerships and undermining and eroding the European narrative". At their core, Russian operations seek to challenge the very concept of objective truth, using four simple tactics: dismiss the critic; distort the fact; distract from the main issue; dismay the audience.²⁰⁹

In 1998, Russia presented to the UN General Assembly a proposal for a resolution on cyber-security. The proposal was dismissed at the time, but it gave an idea of Russia's strategic thinking: cyber-attacks and information warfare were considered on an operational continuum. Its integrated and holistic approach to the information space has the ultimate strategic objective of "undermining the cohesion and the stability of NATO and the European Union in order to renegotiate - from a better position - a new European security architecture".²¹⁰ This is restated in the current Russian Military doctrine (known as the "Gerasimov Doctrine"), where "informational attacks become the system integrator of both kinetic and non-kinetic military means, as well as of government and non-government actors". They are perceived as the most cost-effective tool of non-nuclear coercion, aiming at infiltrate, disorganize, disrupt or destroy adversary state functioning, while deceiving the opponent through psychological subversion, discrediting its decision makers, and disorienting and demoralizing its citizens and armed forces.²¹¹

According to a report from US Senate, President Putin "sees successful democracies, especially those along Russia's periphery, as threats to his regime because they present an attractive

²⁰⁶ Andrew Rettman, *Illicit Russian Money Poses Threat to EU Democracy*, EUobserver, Apr. 21, 2017.

²⁰⁷ Alina Polyakova, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, Atlantic Council, Nov. 2016.

²⁰⁸ Christopher Paul, Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*, Rand Corporation, 2016.

²⁰⁹ Edward Lucas and Ben Nimmo, *Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Win It?*, Center for European Policy Analysis, Nov. 2015.

²¹⁰ Fabio Rugge, *Mind Hacking: information...*

²¹¹ Gen. Valery Gerasimov, *The value of science is in the foresight*, Military Review, Jan 2016.

alternative to his rule. He has thus made it a priority of his regime to attack the democracies of Europe and undermine the transatlantic alliance. State propaganda has played up examples of Western failures in an attempt to undermine the credibility of a Western-style alternative system of government. It has been suggesting that corruption, violation of Human Rights, election's manipulation is endemic, and that liberal Democracy does not really exist and therefore is a goal not worth pursuing".²¹²

The ecosystem created by active measures operation, provides Russia with enough degree of deniability. In fact, all actors involved may appear to be competing or contradicting each other, creating the impression that Russia leadership could not possibly be coordinating everything. This is achieved working through a vast array of cut-outs, corporations' oligarchs, and proxies, in a layered structure that reports (directly or indirectly) to a well-designed structure close to the Kremlin.²¹³

According to C. Watts, Russia's disinformation system operates by blending state sponsored propaganda with sustained social media engagement with targeted audiences. Public opinion manipulation is organised through false accounts that pretend to look like the targeted audience, the use of social bots, troll-farms, with a coordinated activity to advance Russian political and social narratives, undermining popular support and faith in liberal democracy.²¹⁴

Recent studies have identified Russian activities even during the heated discussions that followed the cinematic release of Star Wars: The Last Jedi. Russian trolls had engaged fandoms with the purpose to create division and spreading messages not only of political nature, but also sexist and racist, in the attempt to persuade other users that the movie put their values under attack.²¹⁵

In 2017 Russian defence minister Sergey Shoigu announced that "information operations forces have been established that are expected to be a far more effective tool than all we used before for counter-propaganda purposes".²¹⁶

Russia interference activity has been centralized to the St. Petersburg based Internet Research Agency,²¹⁷ which employs over a thousand agents. It first targeted Russian and Ukrainian citizens, to later expand its activities in Europe and US. The US Department of Justice has revealed that only the operation to manipulate political discourse in America had a budget of over \$25 million and continued all over 2018. It has been established that during the US presidential campaign, Russian operation reached 126 million people on Facebook, 20 million on Instagram, 1.4 on Twitter, and uploaded more than 1000 videos on YouTube, reaching millions of users. The hostile narratives, organised per themes, primarily based on social issues,

²¹² Fabio Ruggie, *Mind Hacking: information...*

²¹³ Clint Watts, *Russia's Active Measures Architecture: Task and Purpose*, Alliance for Securing Democracy, GMF, 2018.

²¹⁴ Clint Watts, *Russia's Active...*

²¹⁵ Morten Bay, *Weaponizing the haters: The Last Jedi and the strategic politicization of pop culture through social media manipulation*, Center for the Digital Future, Department of Information Studies at University of California, Los Angeles, October 2018.

²¹⁶ Aleksandar Vasovic, *Russia sets up information warfare units*, Reuters, 22 February 2017.

²¹⁷ Aleksandar Vasovic, *Russia sets up information warfare units*, Reuters, 22 February 2017.

were cross-platform shared to be better emphasized. The topics were presented to reinforce community and culture pride, exploiting the tribalism within each targeted community. Narratives were designed to erode trust in mainstream media and institutions. Automated accounts were primarily news-focused, while human-operated account were used to engage with users (regular users as well as influencers) in the attempt to influence opinion and shape narratives, using divisions in society and cognitive biases. Most of the content used to build these hostile narratives was not always objectively false. Much of it was not even classifiable as hate speech, but it was intended to reinforce tribalism, to polarize and divide, specifically designed to exploit social fractures, creating a distorted perception of reality by eroding the trust in media, institutions and eventually, democracy itself.²¹⁸

The Internet Research Agency used the most advanced techniques of digital marketing to spread disinformation and propaganda on multiple platforms. This strategy enabled them to reach and even wider audience; it reinforced the credibility of the account used as their message was consistent across platforms, giving them more legitimacy.²¹⁹

On the last days before the Brexit vote, over 156.000 Russian operated accounts massively tweeted to encourage Britons to vote leave. According to a study from the Swansea University and Berkley, in less than 48 hours these accounts controlled by the International Research Agency posted more than 45000 messages, many directed against Muslims residents.²²⁰

Russia tried to influence also the outcome of the Italian referendum on Constitutional reform in 2016, by producing fake stories that have been widely shared on social networks.²²¹

It has to be said that Russia has only exploited an existing condition of social mistrust, weak institutions, and detached elites, which make European countries and the US vulnerable to its meddling strategy. Domestic actors have exploited such condition too, willingly spreading viral disinformation to a greater audience.²²²

²¹⁸ Renee DiResta, Dr. Kris Shaffer, *The Tactics & Tropes...*

²¹⁹ Philip N. Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Liotsiou, *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States: 2012-2018*, Oxford University, Oxford, UK, 2018.

²²⁰ Alexi Mostrous, *Russia used Twitter bots and trolls 'to disrupt' Brexit vote*, The Times, 15 November 2017.

²²¹ Alto Data Analytics, *The construction of anti-immigration electoral messages in Italy*, 2018.

²²² Zeynep Tufekci, *How Social Media Took...*

5. EU Institutions Coordinated Response to Disinformation: an Overview

The European Council first recognised the threat of online disinformation campaigns in 2015,²²³ when it asked the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to address the disinformation campaigns by Russia. The East Strategic Communication Task Force was then set up to address and raise awareness on the matter.

On 26 April 2018, the Commission adopted its Communication on “Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach”,²²⁴ which defines the challenges online disinformation present to our democracies and outlines five clusters of actions for private and public stakeholders that respond to these challenges. As a follow-up, in September 2018 online platforms (Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter), a free-software community (Mozilla), and the advertising industry agreed on a Code of Practice on disinformation to increase online transparency and protect citizens, especially with a view to the 2019 European Parliament elections and more than 50 presidential, national or local/regional elections being held in Member States by 2020, but also in a more long-term perspective. The signatories committed to specific actions to be carried out before the 2019 European Parliament, to share relevant company best practices as well as milestones for the overall implementation of the Code in the EU. The Code of Practice is meant to create a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem and protect users from disinformation. The Commission will, with the help of the European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services (ERGA), monitor the implementation by the signatories and will regularly inform on whether and to what extent individual platforms are meeting these commitments. The Commission will also carry out a comprehensive assessment of the Code's initial 12-month period by the end of 2019.

In addition, an independent network of fact-checkers was established to increase the ability to detect and expose disinformation, and sustained efforts are being made at Union and national level to support media literacy. The European Commission also adopted measures²²⁵ to secure free and fair European elections and recommended the use of sanctions where appropriate, including for the illegal use of personal data to influence the outcome of the elections. In addition, it called on Member States to take the steps needed to preserve the integrity of their electoral systems and infrastructure and test them ahead of the European elections.

Furthermore, the Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats²²⁶ in June 2018 set up the Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service to act as a single focus for the analysis of hybrid threats. It also led to the setting up of the European Centre of Excellence for

²²³ European Council Conclusions, 20 March 2015

²²⁴ European Commission, *Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach*, COM/2018/236, 26 Apr 2018.

²²⁵ European Commission, *Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions Securing Free And Fair European Elections A Contribution From The European Commission To The Leaders' Meeting In Salzburg On 19-20 September 2018*, COM/2018/637, 12 Sept 2018.

²²⁶ European Parliament, *Joint Communication To The European Parliament, The European Council And The Council Increasing Resilience And Bolstering Capabilities To Address Hybrid Threats*, JOIN/2018/16, 13 June 2018.

Countering Hybrid Threats in Finland,²²⁷ which shares best practices and supports the activities of the Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in this field.

The European Council²²⁸ then invited the "High Representative and the Commission to present, in cooperation with the Member States and in line with the March 2015 European Council conclusions, an action plan by December 2018 with specific proposals for a coordinated response to the challenge of disinformation, including appropriate mandates and sufficient resources for the relevant EEAS Strategic Communications teams" and to protect the Union's democratic systems and combat disinformation, including in the context of the upcoming European elections"²²⁹.

The European Commission and the High Representative adopted the Joint Communication setting out an "Action Plan against Disinformation" on 5 December 2018.

The Action Plan responds to the calls of the European Council in June and October 2018 to develop a coordinated response to the challenges in this field, both within the EU and in its neighbourhood, especially in view of the forthcoming European elections. It builds on existing Commission initiatives and the work of the East Strategic Communication Task Force of the European External Action Service. It sets out actions to be taken by the Commission and the High Representative, with the assistance of the European External Action Service, in cooperation with Member States and the European Parliament. Other actions aim to strengthen coordinated and joint responses to disinformation, to mobilise the private sector to make sure that it delivers on its commitments in this field, and to improve the resilience of society to the challenges that disinformation creates.

On 12 March 2019 the European Parliament adopted new rules on political campaigning, including dissuading and penalising EU-level political organisations that deliberately misuse personal data in European election campaigns. The Council adopted the new provisions on 19 March 2019.²³⁰ The new rules take the form of amendments to the 2014 regulation governing the statute and funding of European political parties and foundations and are binding and directly applicable in all Member States as of 25 March 2019. Also on 12 March 2019, the European Parliament strongly condemned in a resolution the increasingly aggressive actions of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea and others in this context, "which seek to undermine the foundations and principles of European democracies as well as the sovereignty of all Eastern Partnership countries, as well as influence elections and support extremist movements, taking into account that the scale of cyberattacks is constantly growing".²³¹

Still in March 2019, the Rapid Alert System, which was one of the key deliverables under the Action Plan, was launched. The Rapid Alert System aims to strengthen coordination, analysis

²²⁷ It is an intergovernmental think tank based in Helsinki, Finland, focusing on responses to hybrid threats under the auspices of the European Union (EU) and NATO.

²²⁸ European Council conclusions, 28 June 2018.

²²⁹ European Council conclusions, 18 October 2018.

²³⁰ European Council, *EU adopts new rules to prevent misuse of personal data by European political parties*, 19 March 2019.

²³¹ European Parliament, *Follow up taken by the EEAS two years after the EP report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties*, P8_TA-PROV(2019)0187, 13 March 2019.

and joint responses to disinformation through creating a dedicated digital platform for a network of contact points from the EU Member States and the EU institutions, working in close cooperation with the European Election Cooperation Network. This will facilitate sharing of data and assessment, to enable common situational awareness, coordinated attribution and response and ensure time and resource efficiency. The Commission and the High Representative will ensure regular exchange of information and best practices with key partners, including within the G7 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Two weeks ahead of the European Parliament elections, the EU Heads of State or Government, who met for the informal European Council of 9 May 2019 in the Romanian city of Sibiu, discussed safeguarding democracies, including through the fight against disinformation, as one of the next overarching priorities that should guide the work of the EU for the years to come.



Figure 5 - Source: European Commission

Case Study

6. The 2018 Italian General Election

For centuries, Italy has been considered a political laboratory, anticipating trends that have later affected the rest of Europe.

During the late Middle-Ages, the political experience of free-cities has been an extraordinary example of civil coexistence and institutions building. It spread values such as: respect for individual liberties; promotion and governance of the common good; use of the majority rule in collegial procedures; justice administered under the rule of law; and openness to the political participation of the lower classes,²³² that has generated institutional values and practices, which only centuries later would have been translated into standards of legal-political civilization.²³³

From the XIV century, the Italian humanism, a political expression of a bourgeoisie that has consolidated its heritage and aspirations to political power, was part of the formation of national monarchies.²³⁴

In the XX Century, Italy was the birthplace for the tragic authoritarian experience of Mussolini's fascism, whose legacy still globally resonates in society today. In more recent times, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Italy was the first European country to experience the rise of a major anti-establishment political party. Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (EPP) was in fact regarded by many scholars as the pioneer of "neoliberal populism" in Europe.²³⁵

6.1 The Results

On 4 March 2018 elections were held for the renewal of the Italian Parliament. The results have completely reshaped the country's political landscape.

The 5-Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle - EFDD) won more than 30 percent of the votes, becoming the most voted party in Italy. The League (Lega - ENF) with 17 percent overtook Forza Italia (EPP), which gained 14 percent. Together with Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia – ECR), which slightly exceeded 4 percent, the centre-right was the most voted coalition. The Democratic Party (Partito Democratico – S&D) recorded the worst defeat in its history, only getting 18 percent. Former European Commissioner Emma Bonino's +Europa (ALDE) got just over two percent. Free and Equal (Liberi e Uguali – GUE/NGL) barely passed the minimal

²³² Gianmarco De Angelis, *Omnes simul aut quot plures habere potero. Rappresentazioni delle collettività e decisioni a maggioranza nei Comuni italiani del XII secolo*, Reti Medievali Rivista, n. 12, 2, 2011.

²³³ Mario Ascheri, *Le città-Stato*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006.

²³⁴ Riccardo Fubini, *Il contributo italiano alla storia del pensiero*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, 2013.

²³⁵ Cas Mudde, *How populism became the concept that defines our Age*, The Guardian, 22 November 2018.

threshold required by the electoral law to gain seats in the Parliament. The abstention rate was the highest since 1948, with a turnout of only 72.9 percent.²³⁶

The political network mapping (figure 6), based on Twitter interactions,²³⁷ shows a high polarization in five, distinct, areas. On top, the red area is Free and Equals (GUE/NGL); on the left, the purple area is the Democratic Party (S&D); on the bottom, Brothers of Italy (ECR) is compressed between the bigger green area representing the League (ENF), and the blue area representing Forza Italia (EPP). On the right, the orange area represents the 5 Stars Movement (EFDD).

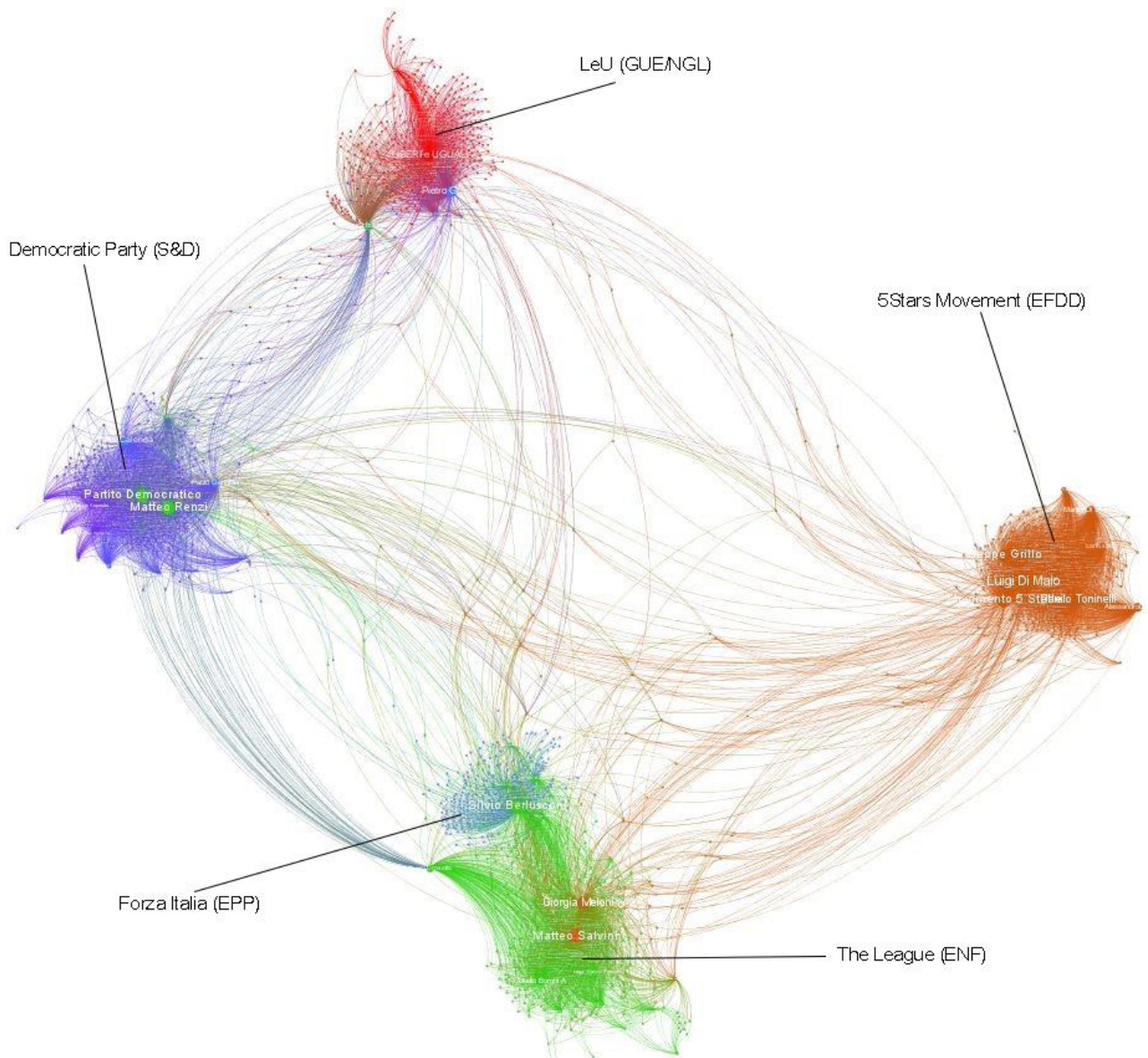


Figure 6 - Network Mapping. Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre

²³⁶ Ministero dell'Interno, *Risultati Elezioni Politiche 4 Marzo 2018*.

²³⁷ Data collection methodology explained in Chapter 7.

6.2 The Role of Social Media during the Electoral Campaign

Data on active social media users in Italy shows the prominent role of Facebook, with 35.7 million accounts, followed by YouTube (24 million); Instagram (22.3 million); and Twitter (8 million). On average, 43 million Italians are online daily.²³⁸

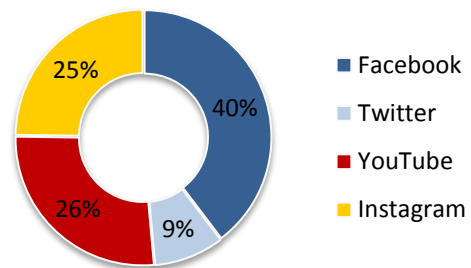


Figure 7 - Social Media Users in Italy

For the first time in Italian history, online social media played an active role during the electoral campaign. However, communication strategies

varied from party to party. The Democratic Party (S&D) decided not to have a centralized

communication strategy, leaving complete freedom to all candidates. Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi was the only one able to achieve a personal high engagement of users in the first months of the campaign; however, according to experts; the overall party communication looked chaotic and sometimes not consistent.²³⁹ On the other hand, Forza Italia (EPP) and Free and Equals (GUE/NGL) have used social media in a rather static manner, as a simple showcase of electoral events, resulting in an overall low engagement.

The League (ENF) and above all the 5 Stars Movement (EFDD), adopted instead a very modern and dynamic communication strategies, which resulted in high engagement and produced most of the online traffic.

6.2.1 Focus on the League Strategy

The League has used an automated system to monitor Salvini's social networks, analyse which posts and tweets got the best results, and what kind of people interacted with them. "La Bestia" ("The Beast") is the nickname given to it by its creator, Luca Morisi, when it was conceived in 2014. It became operative in 2016.²⁴⁰

According to Morisi, "La Bestia" is a set of software for collaborative work, automation of cross-posting activities, creation of graphics, advertising of events, and monitoring of news.²⁴¹ It was later refined, with the analysis of Facebook and Twitter posts and coordinated with a mailing list to engage non-social media users. According to experts, the communication team, using also automated accounts, amplified allegedly semi-truthful news, making them "viral" and part of a "shared culture", confirmed by charismatic resources considered honest and reliable, and exploiting cognitive failures, making them difficult to challenge due to the large number of

²³⁸ Giuliano Ambrosio, *Lo stato degli Utenti Attivi al Mese sui Social Media in Italia e nel Mondo 2019*.

²³⁹ Maria Rosaria Iovinella, *Lo Stato Social, un racconto inedito sulle politiche 2018*, Wired, 17 March 2018.

²⁴⁰ Giovanni Diamanti, Lorenzo Pregliasco, *Fenomeno Salvini: Chi è, come comunica, perché lo votano*, LIT Edizioni, 2018.

²⁴¹ Giorgia Baroncini, *Politica e comunicazione: ecco la "Bestia" di Salvini*, Il Giornale, 6 October 2018.

shares. The whole system was centralized around its leader. The strategy aimed at immediately occupy the media space, commenting first the news of the day, forcing traditional media, opponents, and allies to run after and react. Strong messages were used to immediately polarize the discussion, provoking "negative feelings" - anger, fear and aggression - in order to "lower the guard" of the listener.²⁴²

The League was the only one to use "Gamification"²⁴³ during the electoral campaign, with a game called "Vinci Salvini" (Win Salvini). In a nutshell, the fastest Facebook users to put a like to the posts of the leader gained points, which allowed the first classified to get a phone call from Salvini himself, a selfie²⁴⁴ posted on the official Facebook page, and even a private meeting with the leader. The real goal was to generate engagement, in order to trick the platform algorithm to give greater visibility to what Salvini published, making the propaganda machine more effective.

According to R. Luna, Salvini has always looked carefully at Trump and the League has persistently sought out Steve Bannon, whom he personally met in March 2018. Before the Italian elections, rumours were circulating about the opening of a Cambridge Analytica office in Italy, aborted following the scandal that involved the company. At the time, the company claimed to have "realized a project for an Italian party that had been successful for the last time in the 80s". That party has never been identified.²⁴⁵

6.2.2 Focus on 5 Star Movement Strategy

The idea behind the communication strategy adopted by the 5 Stars Movement (and the party itself) dates back at least twenty years, and it is rather fascinating.

At the end of the 1990s, a small IT consultancy company called Webegg began experimenting with some consensus distribution techniques within corporate intranet. The mastermind was Gianroberto Casaleggio, the future founder of the M5S. In those years Casaleggio analysed various company intranets and observed that most were used for internal communications only, but some were dedicated to knowledge management, centred on the concept of community. Those had the power to influence opinions and create communities of people.²⁴⁶

This seems obvious now, but at the end of the 1990s it was substantially unknown to society and to public debate. The World Wide Web was invented by Sir Tim Berners-Lee only a few years earlier in 1989,²⁴⁷ Google was just born (1997) and social networks would arrive only many years later (Facebook 2004, Twitter 2006). At the end of the 1990s, forums and

²⁴² Fabio Martini, *"La Bestia", l'algoritmo che suggerisce a Salvini se e quanto essere cattivo*, La Stampa, 9 September 2018.

²⁴³ Gamification is the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts.

²⁴⁴ Merriam-Webster defines a selfie as "an image that includes oneself (often with another person or as part of a group) and is taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks".

²⁴⁵ Riccardo Luna, *Salvini e Bannon, tutta la storia*, AGI, 24 March 2018.

²⁴⁶ Nicola Biondo, Marco Canestrari, *Supernova*, Ponte alle Grazie, Firenze, 2018.

²⁴⁷ For more info: <https://home.cern/science/computing/birth-web>

newsgroups were mostly used by experts to discuss in controlled environments. These forums were the first ground for social engineering experiments, where Casaleggio's team sought to condition the opinions of unsuspecting users. The strategy used was quite simple: one member of the group launched the discussion on one theme, while another responded with a contrasting position. The others group members came together to support the discussion until the other employees joined the discussion, creating what Casaleggio called the "avalanche of consent". These experiments were repeated hundreds of times, each time inserting background noises or piloted distortions of the opinion to test the various points of view. The ultimate aim was to understand what were the most effective methods to manipulate opinions and create consensus, maintaining a semblance of democratic discussion.²⁴⁸

The experience in Webegg ended in 2004, when the company was sold. However, Casaleggio understood the revolution of the newly born social networks. He identified in Beppe Grillo - a comedian who had great success in the 80s, then reinvented himself as a satirical flogger of political corruption - as the beacon to attract that part of disillusioned population that felt abandoned by politics. The 5 Stars Movement, founded a few years later, should be considered as a total political novelty.²⁴⁹

In a country where mainstream parties are still organised following the twentieth century traditions - with the only difference represented by Forza Italia, the semi-liquid party centred on the figure of its leader, Silvio Berlusconi - the 5 Stars Movement is instead a complete revolution: a party completely disconnected from the territory, where assemblies take place in different places chosen at the time, without overt leadership, all coordinated online using appropriate platforms.²⁵⁰

In 2013, a book of quotes by Gianroberto Casaleggio, entitled "Tu Sei Rete" stated "Until a few years ago, the relationships between people were random, while the life and evolution of networks follow precise rules. The knowledge of these rules allows us to use networks to our advantage".²⁵¹

Casaleggio immediately figured out the importance of two elements of a network: nodes and connections. The network, in fact, although not centralized, can be influenced and partially controlled upstream. According to Casaleggio, having defined the rules at local level, it is possible to drive users towards an objective. Albert Laszlo Barabasi, one of the main experts on network theory, argued that nodes with multiple connections tend to attract more and more of them, in what he called the "preferential attachment" and the "rich get richer effect".²⁵² In such political organization, indications are given to subjects in strategic positions, so to appear to be bottom-up to users. Usually, in the expansion process, networks reach a critical point in which the nodes moved too far away from the centre and becoming autonomous, making them

²⁴⁸ Manuela Perrone, *Il M5S? Un esperimento creato in laboratorio*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 9 April 2018.

²⁴⁹ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento*, Laterza, Milano, 2018.

²⁵⁰ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento*..

²⁵¹ Davide Casaleggio, *Tu Sei Rete*, Casaleggio Associati, Milano, 2013.

²⁵² Albert Laszlo Barabasi, *Statistical mechanics of complex networks*, Reviews of Modern Physics, n. 74 (1), 2002.

vulnerable or exposed to external infiltration. For this reason, Casaleggio had identified key figures with the task of keeping united distinct groups within the organization.²⁵³

A highly loyal community was built in a short time, made of in-born and in-grown "influencers", young media leaders who collect hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook, then to be elected first in local institutions, then in the Parliament. Their public speeches were designed to be shared on the various official web platforms, generating traffic, visualizations and attracting new sympathizers. The strategy designed by Casaleggio is rather simple: channel the feeling of the people online and govern it without appearing directly.²⁵⁴

The contents posted on the various platforms controlled by Casaleggio are analysed to understand which has greater grip on users. The slogans used by the 5 Stars Movement, and even earlier for Grillo's shows, are designed for serial repetition and to intercept the widespread malaise that political parties and media are not able to see. People's anger existed long before the 5 Stars Movement, but now these protests can be channelled against political parties and newspapers, which gradually lost credibility and respect. The M5S rides these vulnerabilities, setting up information wars, attacking the media to get away from any criticism, anticipating for years Trump's "fake news strategy" or Nigel Farage attacks to the press during the campaign for Brexit.²⁵⁵

The social composition of the 5 Stars Movement gathers workers, self-employed workers, private employees and students. The level of education is medium-high, with many graduates.²⁵⁶ Its post-ideological stance is not based on ideological principles, but on the preferences of its voters. The form influences the substance, the possession of data is central to adjust the message, or to create very effective diversions in times of difficulty. The 5 Stars Movement represents a revolution because it is the first case of political party that understands the central role of data and how to exploit it, sometimes even in unconventional ways.²⁵⁷

However, data alone is useless if it is not combined with a flexible interpreting tool, powerful enough to identify the most interesting topics, the most influential users of the community, who is still undecided, but above all, allows knowing with great precision on what vulnerabilities to leverage to gain consensus. The Movement's propaganda machine is based on groups, pages, often unofficial accounts that take advantage of the structure of online platforms to distribute their contents. The network is flooded and saturated with memes and obsessively repeated messages. Its targets were not only political opponents, but anyone who even gave the impression of opposing the Movement.²⁵⁸

²⁵³ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento...*

²⁵⁴ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento...*

²⁵⁵ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento...*

²⁵⁶ Tatiana Vani, *Sorpresa, gli elettori grillini sono i più colti e abbinati; al Pd sono rimasti gli anziani (con la licenza elementare)*, Linkiesta, 7 March 2018.

²⁵⁷ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento...*

²⁵⁸ Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'Esperimento...*

6.3 Russia and Italy: an Overview

Italy has a long-time tradition of good relations with Russia. During the cold war, the Italian communist party (one of the largest in Western Europe together with the French one) had strong ties with the Soviet Union. Moreover, Silvio Berlusconi has never hidden his personal friendship with Vladimir Putin.²⁵⁹ But something has changed in the last years.

According to A. Guerrera,²⁶⁰ within anti-establishment parties, Putin became a powerful symbol of nationalism and re-establishment of traditional identitarian values against globalist effort to weaken and dissolve it. Some of these parties have become strong advocates of a pro-Kremlin foreign policy agenda, and have extensively resorted to fake news and conspiracy theories for their campaigns, often directly drawn from Russian state-owned media outlets.

According to an analysis published by BuzzFeed News,²⁶¹ during the 2016 constitutional referendum,²⁶² the 5 Stars Movement allegedly used a "sprawling network of websites and social media accounts that [were] spreading fake news, conspiracy theories, and pro-Kremlin stories to millions of people", including videos specifically created by RT.²⁶³ Unlike the League, the 5 Stars Movement has only recently shifted toward a pro-Russian foreign policy, but has never openly publicized contacts and meetings with Russian officials. Nevertheless, since 2015, Russian state-owned news outlets like RT, Sputnik, have begun to increase 5 Stars Movement visibility, with interviews to its leaders,²⁶⁴ and the strategic narrative (which included disinformation and conspiracy theories) depicting Italy as a country on the verge of chaos, that was later echoed by the extensive network of 5 Stars Movement websites and social media accounts.²⁶⁵

Although there are not known official financial relationship between the 5 Stars Movement and Russia, in 2017 an Italian national security official told Business Insider "I think some of our political parties are vulnerable to infiltration. They do not have the experience, the antibodies, to fend off such formidable intelligence services".²⁶⁶

Russia has well established formal political ties with a number of populist and extreme-right political parties: In 2017, ruling party Russia United has signed a cooperation agreement with

²⁵⁹ Riccardo Amati, *La storia dell'amicizia tra Berlusconi e Putin*, Lettera43, 6 October 2018.

²⁶⁰ Antonello Guerrera, *Così la Russia infiltra i suoi cavalli di Troia anche in Italia*, La Repubblica, 15 Nov 2017.

²⁶¹ BuzzFeed News is an American news website, specialized in investigative journalism.

²⁶² Elisabetta Povoledo, *Italy's Constitutional Referendum: What You Need to Know*, The New York Times, 2 December 2016.

²⁶³ Alberto Nardelli & Craig Silverman, *Italy's Most Popular Political Party Is Leading Europe in Fake News and Kremlin Propaganda*, BuzzFeed News, Nov. 29, 2016.

²⁶⁴ Beppe Grillo, *RT Interview: Sono a favore dell'Europa ma contro l'Euro #fuoridalleuro*, Beppegrillo.it, 10 April 2015.

²⁶⁵ Alberto Nardelli, Craig Silverman, *Italy's Most Popular Political Party is Leading Europe in Fake News and Kremlin Propaganda*, Buzzfeed, 26 November 2016.

²⁶⁶ Jason Horowitz, *With Italy No Longer in U.S. Focus, Russia Swoops to Fill the Void*, The New York Times, 29 May 2017.

the League, where they agreed to develop ties in the Council of Europe,²⁶⁷ the OSCE,²⁶⁸ and promote business links between the two countries.²⁶⁹

In the last decades, many extreme-right and neo-fascist movements have been in contact with Russian ultranationalists, sharing the same ideas on the moral and spiritual degradation of modern western society.²⁷⁰ Among the most influential people was Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin,²⁷¹ who began as a fringe figure, but has briefly entered the mainstream political scene. He has been frequently invited to the League's sponsored conferences, which made his ideas better known in Italy.²⁷²

Unlike what happened in other Western countries, Russian meddling in Italian elections has chosen different less-invasive measures, perhaps having considered that an aggressive campaign was not the most effective strategy in an already highly polarized political arena. However, citizens' awareness on Russian cyber-warfare activities is low and sometimes dismissed as "exaggerated" by several journalists and political commentators.

6.4 Analysis of Social Media Data

The growing frustration and anger with the Italian establishment has fuelled the resurgence of populist parties, which eventually achieved a major electoral success. The League was able to shift its target from southern Italians to concentrate on strong opposition to immigration, Islam, the European Union, and the refugees fleeing from Syria and other war-torn regions.²⁷³

On the other hand, the electoral success of the 5 Stars Movement should not be intended only as a reaction from the frustration of the economic losers of globalization, but it includes also the cultural losers, it is the result of the conflict between the suburbs against the centre or the excluded against the included. Populism was fuelled not only by economic crises, but also by political crises that may be independent of the bad economic trend. In Italy, the political crisis preceded the economic one, making the 5 Stars Movement an anomalous case in Europe.²⁷⁴

The main narratives used during the electoral campaign were: security, immigration, and the economic situation. According to a study from Istituto Cattaneo, one of the keys to the success of the 5 Star Movement was to better address "marginal social sectors that have suffered the

²⁶⁷ The Council of Europe is an international organisation whose stated aim is to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. It is not associated to any institution of the European Union.

²⁶⁸ The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization. Its mandate includes issues such as arms control, promotion of human rights, freedom of the press, and fair elections.

²⁶⁹ Committee on Foreign Relations of the USA, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security*, 10 January 2018.

²⁷⁰ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far-Right*, Institute for Human Sciences, 25 January 2017.

²⁷¹ For more info: Conor Lynch, *Did philosopher Alexander Dugin, aka "Putin's brain," shape the 2016 election?*, Salon, 5 May 2018.

²⁷² Giovanni Savino, *From Evola to Dugin: The Neo-Eurasian Connection in Italy*, Eurasianism and the European Far Right: The Future Europe-Russia Relationship, Lexington Books, 2015.

²⁷³ Jean-Yves Camus, Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics...*

²⁷⁴ Piergiorgio Corbetta, *I populismi europei...*

difficulties of the economic crisis, defying the left even in terms of claims and material promises".²⁷⁵

The brutal murder of Pamela Mastropietro in Macerata was exploited by the League to push its anti-immigration agenda.²⁷⁶ The hate-crime that followed some days after, committed by Luca Traini (a former League candidate for local office) in the same city,²⁷⁷ was therefore perceived by far-right supporters as not driven by racism or intolerance, but as evidence of citizens' frustration against cosmopolitan elites, allegedly responsible of encouraging an

uncontrolled mass migration.²⁷⁸

A sentiment analysis of shared messages during the elections, made by Sociometrica using artificial intelligence, showed that an overall 53.3% of sentiments were negative, 31.1% were neutral, while only 15.6% expressed a fully positive sentiment.²⁷⁹

A recent research conducted by Ipsos²⁸⁰ on people's perceptions has established that Italy is the European country with the most distorted perception of facts, however a large

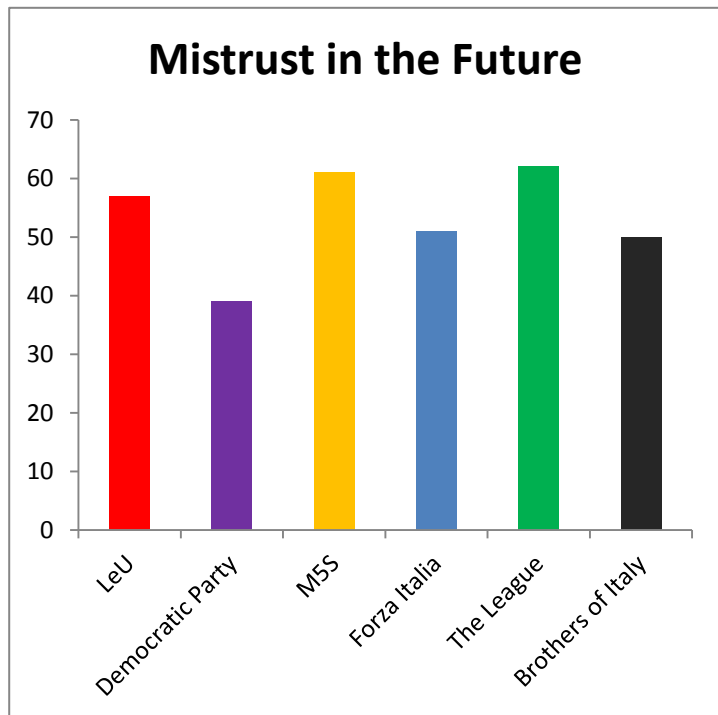


Figure 8 - Source: IPSOS

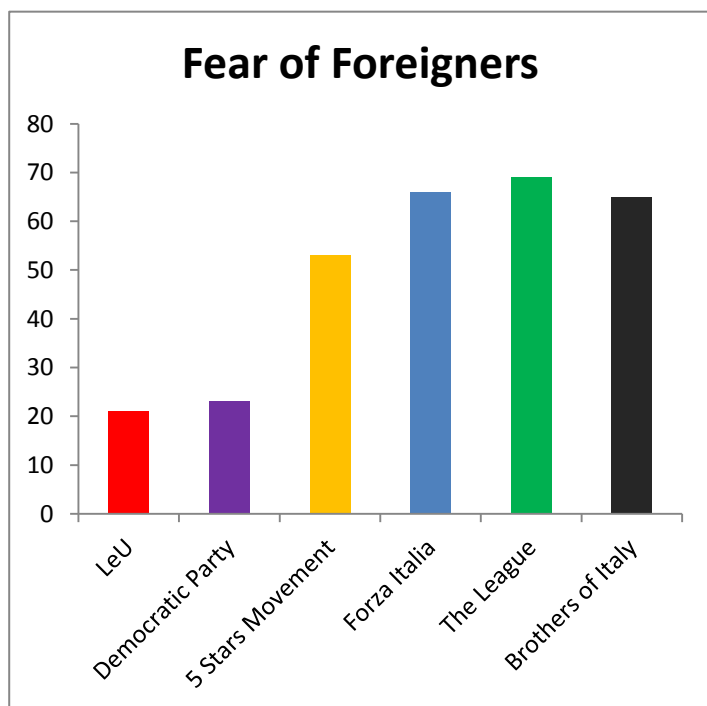


Figure 9 - Source: IPSOS

²⁷⁵ Piergiorgio Corbetta, Pasquale Colloca, Nicoletta Cavazza, Michele Roccato, *Lega and Five-star Movement voters: exploring the role of cultural, economic and political bewilderment*, Contemporary Italian Politics, Vol. 10, Issue 3, 2018.

²⁷⁶ Jason Horowitz, *This Italian Town Once Welcomed Migrants. Now, it's a Symbol for Right-Wing Politics*, the New York Times, 7 July 2018.

²⁷⁷ *Italy drive-by attack targets immigrants in Macerata*, BBC, 3 February 2018.

²⁷⁸ *Luca sei un eroe, commenti choc sul Lupo di Macerata*, AdnKronos, 4 February 2018.

²⁷⁹ Antonio Preiti, *Dentro il Voto degli Italiani*, Sociometrica, 7 March 2018.

²⁸⁰ Bobby Duffy, *The Perils of Perception: Why We're Wrong About Nearly Everything*, Atlantic Books, 2018.

number of Italians believe they can recognize fake stories.²⁸¹

Polls conducted during the electoral campaign have shown a generalized pessimism towards the future (figure 8), but also an aversion towards immigrants by the voters of right-wing parties and the 5 Stars Movement (figure 9), together with a low level of trust in the state and European institutions (figure 10).²⁸²

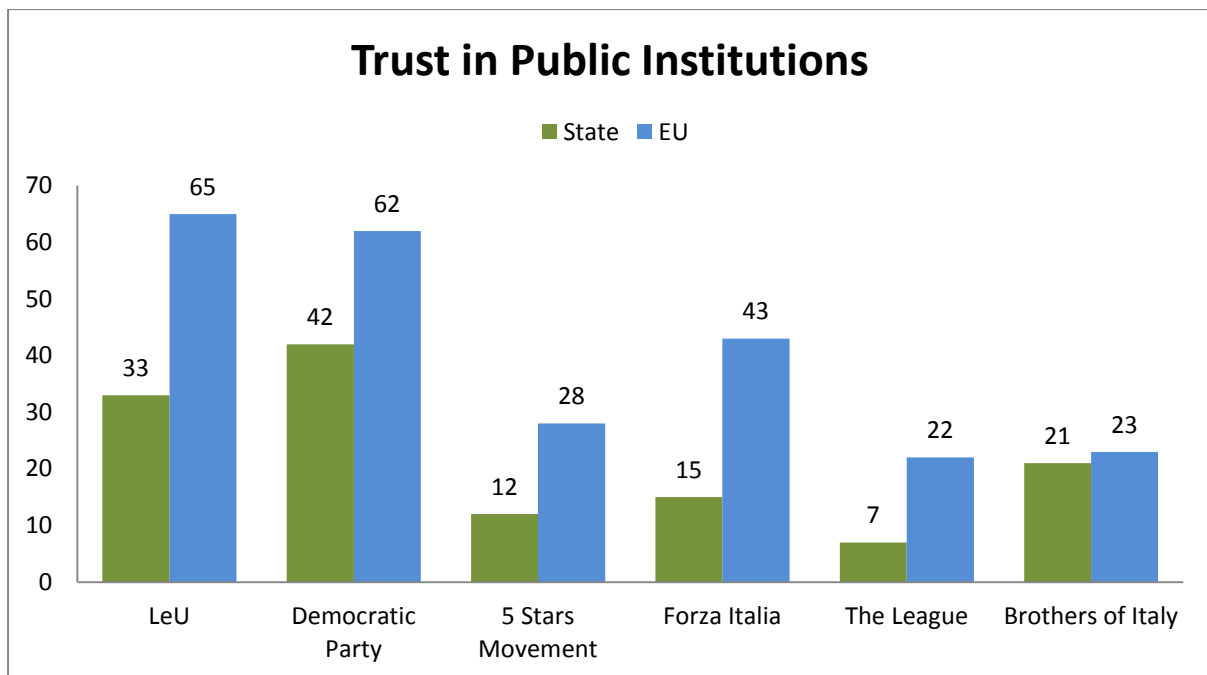


Figure 10 - Source: IPSOS

6.4.1 Analysis of Most Relevant News Outlets

During the electoral campaign, traditional media still played a prominent role in the information diet of citizens. The analysis of the most shared news sources by political area (figure 11)²⁸³ shows a general diffuse presence of mainstream media, although hyper-partisan sources held a notable role, in particular for the 5 Stars Movement.

Among mainstream media outlets, La Repubblica and Corriere della Sera were shared by a politically cross-partisan audience, while other media appeared to be more relevant inside well-defined political areas. On the left, along with partisan outlets like Democatica (website managed by the Democratic Party), nextquotidiano and Huffington Post were among the most shared sources. On the right, Il Giornale (owned by Berlusconi's family), and conservative outlet Libero Quotidiano, were the most shared along with Il Populista, a media outlet very close to

²⁸¹ IPSOS, *Fake news, filter bubbles, post-truth and trust*, 2019.

²⁸² Demos, *Elezioni Politiche 2018, Analisi dei Risultati*, April 2018.

²⁸³ Methodology explained in chapter 7.

Matteo Salvini. For the 5 Stars Movement, Il Fatto Quotidiano is among the most shared media sources together with partisan websites managed directly by the Movement.

It is worth noting that the only non-Italian media shared during the electoral campaign were The Guardian on the left, and Breitbart and Sputnik on the right.

The analysis of the overall outlets shared (figure 12) shows the large amount of information coming from hyper-partisan sources that probably shaped public perceptions and reinforced groups' bias.

Most Shared News Outlets per Political Area

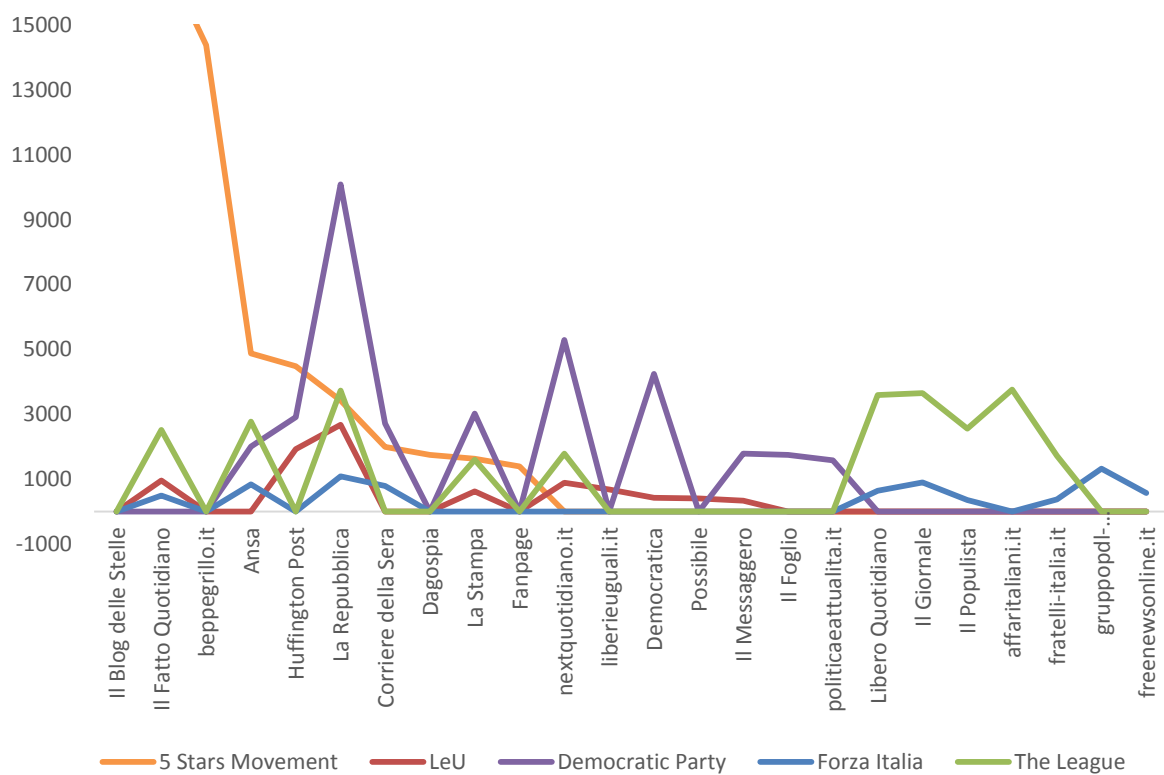


Figure 11 - Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre

LeU (GUE/NGL)	
Outlet Name	Shares
La Repubblica	2681
Huffington Post	1931
Il Fatto Quotidiano	960
nextquotidiano.it	892
liberieuguali.it	682
Ansa	636
La Stampa	629
Democratica	423
Possibile	410
Il Messaggero	338

Democratic Party (S&D)	
Outlet Name	Shares
La Repubblica	10087
nextquotidiano.it	5295
Democratica	4244
La Stampa	3027
Huffington Post	2911
Corriere della Sera	2714
Ansa	2002
Il Messaggero	1790
Il Foglio	1747
politicaeattualita.it	1579

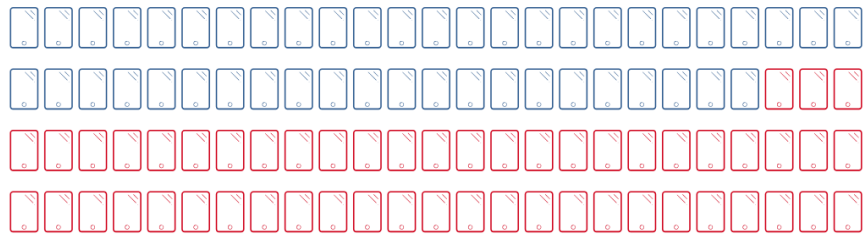
5 Stars Movement (EFDD)	
Outlet Name	Shares
Il Blog delle Stelle	43527
Il Fatto Quotidiano	17286
beppegrillo.it	14384
Ansa	4877
Huffington Post	4482
La Repubblica	3423
Corriere della Sera	1992
Dagospia	1753
La Stampa	1632
Fanpage	1397

Forza Italia (EPP)	
Outlet Name	Shares
berlusconipresidente.it	1329
La Repubblica	1084
Il Giornale	899
Ansa	843
Corriere della Sera	790
Libero Quotidiano	642
freenewsonline.it	572
Il Fatto Quotidiano	495
fratelli-italia.it	379
Il Populista	363

The League (ENF)	
Outlet Name	Shares
Libero Quotidiano	3595
Il Giornale	3653
Il Populista	2559
Il Fatto Quotidiano	2519
La Repubblica	3733
affaritaliani.it	3759
Ansa	2779
nextquotidiano.it	1788
fratelli-italia.it	1721
La Stampa	1598

MOST SHARED OUTLETS

Traditional media played a prominent role, however information coming from hyper-partisan sources probably shaped public perceptions and reinforced groups' bias.



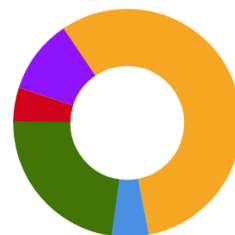
■ Mainstream (47.04%) ■ Hyperpartisan (52.96%)

Mainstream Outlets



■ LeU (Gue/NGL) (8.77%) ■ Democratic Party (S&D) (30.14%)
 ■ 5 Stars Movement (EFDD) (32.08%) ■ Forza Italia (EPP) (5.48%)
 ■ The League (ENF) (23.54%)

Hyperpartisan Outlets



■ LeU (GUE/NGL) (4.96%) ■ Democratic Party (S&D) (10.57%)
 ■ 5 Stars Movement (EFDD) (56.25%) ■ Forza Italia (EPP) (5.29%)
 ■ The League (ENF) (22.93%)

Twitter shares from 1 Jan 2018 to 5 March 2018
 Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre



Figure 12 - Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre

6.5 Monitoring the Narratives

During the last three weeks of the electoral campaign, Amnesty International Italy monitored the social profiles of all candidates, reporting the use of stereotypes, offensive statements, racism, discriminatory and incitement to violence targeting vulnerable groups as migrants and refugees, Roma, LGBTQI people, women, Jewish and Islamic communities.

According to their report, 51% of the statements were to be attributed to candidates of the League, 27% to Brothers of Italy, 13% to Forza Italia, and 2% to the 5 Stars Movement. The central theme on the right, with around 91% of the statements, targeted migrants. 32% conveyed fake news and altered data, 10% concerned the issue of security, and 7% the issue of reception, with immigration identified as a "social bomb", able to lead to "social conflict" and "war at home".²⁸⁴

Anti-establishment and Euro-scepticism were the main topics for the 5 Stars Movement, which presented itself as the alternative to the old parties. According to a study, at the end of 2016 there were almost 600 pages, accounts and groups supporting the 5 Stars Movement on Facebook that reached almost 3 million people. An organised network, where the demonization of the political adversary, disinformation operations to destroy the reputation of someone, memes, and coordinated trolling has been aggregated around some big issues: The Democratic Party and its leaders, immigrants, the European institutions and the Euro.²⁸⁵

Far-right groups often used anti-Muslim propaganda, sometimes pushing conspiracy theories featuring Jews supporting a secret plot for the invasion of Europe. In many statements, Hungarian billionaire George Soros was described as "one of the most depraved and dangerous person of our time, responsible for the invasion of Negroid and Semitic hordes. He is the enemy of Western civilization, of the nation-state and of the white European man. His aim is to build a rainbow coalition composed of homosexuals, feminists, Muslims and Marxists who hate to work. The only one to oppose him is Vladimir Putin".²⁸⁶ During the electoral campaign, a considerable amount of anti-Soros messages were shared.

Figure 13 shows how the four monitored narratives (Migration, Europe, Vaccination, and Financial System) were exploited during the electoral campaign. Compulsory vaccination for students was widely discussed particularly in January,²⁸⁷ while migration spiked in February, after the killing of Pamela Mastropietro and the following hate crime committed by Luca Traini in Macerata.²⁸⁸ European institutions were constantly discussed among pro-Europe and Eurosceptics candidates, in particular after statements made by European Commission officers on Italian elections.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ Amnesty International Italia, *Il Barometro dell'Odio*, 2018.

²⁸⁵ Jacopo Iacoboni, *Ecco la cyber propaganda pro M5S. La procura indaga sull'account chiave*, La Stampa, 16 Nov 2016.

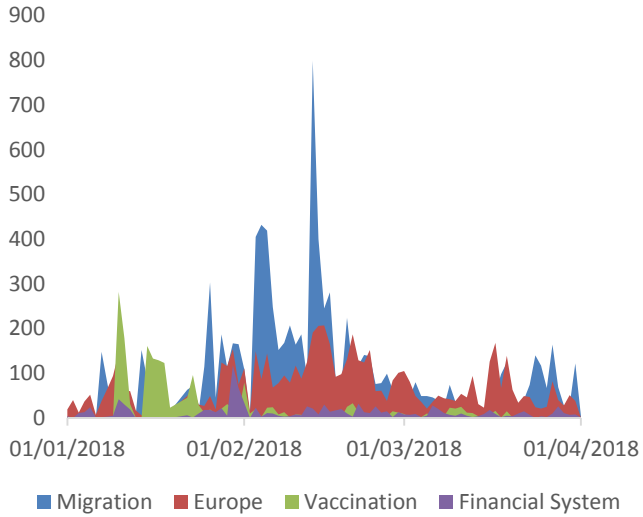
²⁸⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *La Tentazione Populista*, La Grande Regressione, Feltrinelli, 2018.

²⁸⁷ Andrea Gagliardi, *Scontro sui vaccini, Salvini: toglieremo obbligo. Lorenzin: estremismo dell'incompetenza*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 10 Jan 2018.

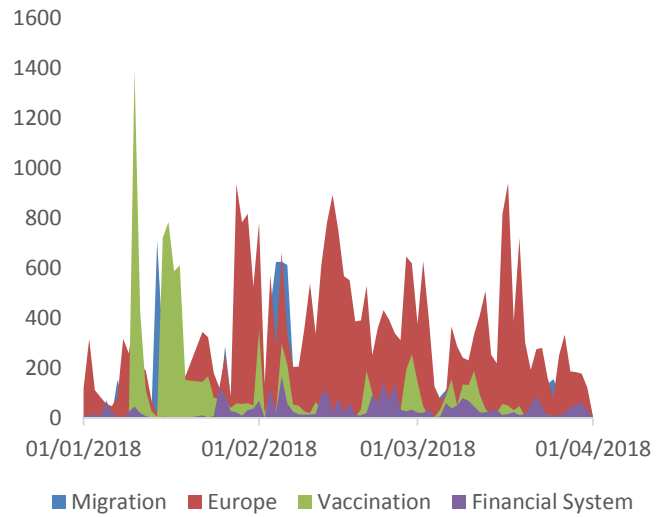
²⁸⁸ *Un uomo ha sparato a degli stranieri per le strade di Macerata*, Il Post, 3 Feb 2018.

²⁸⁹ e.g. ANSA, *Allarme Moscovici: In Italia c'è un rischio politico per l'Ue*, 17 Jan 2018.

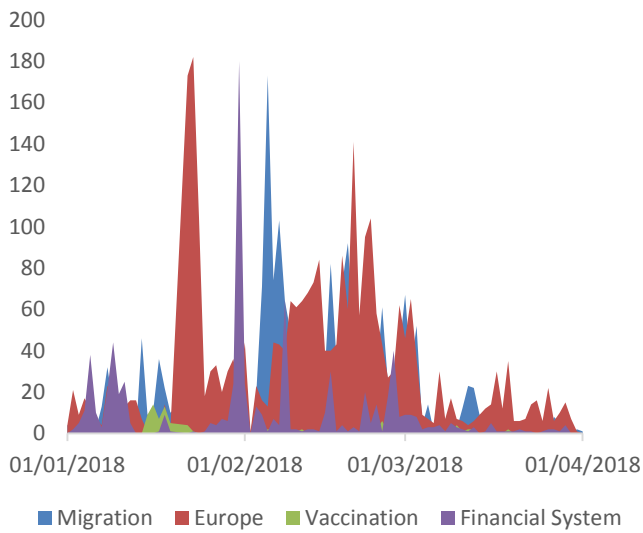
LeU (GUE/NGL)



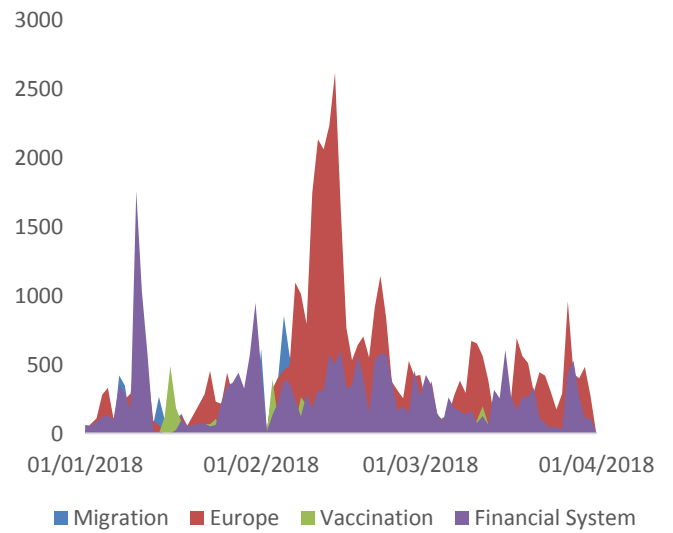
Democratic Party (S&D)



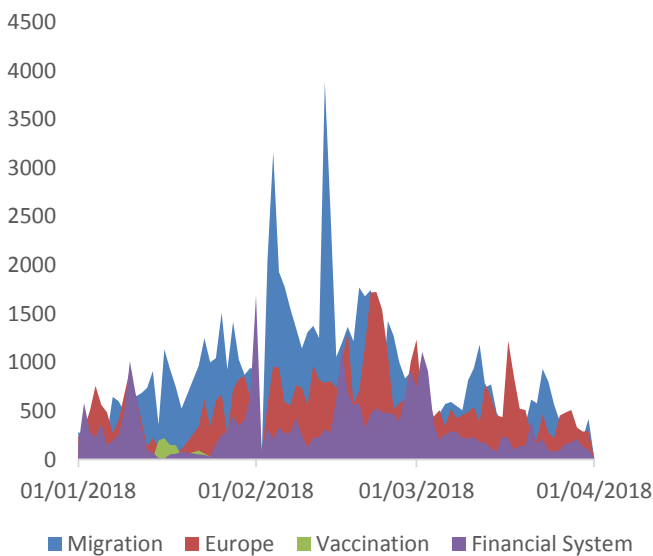
Forza Italia (EPP)



5 Stars Movement (EFDD)



The League (ENF)



Total data

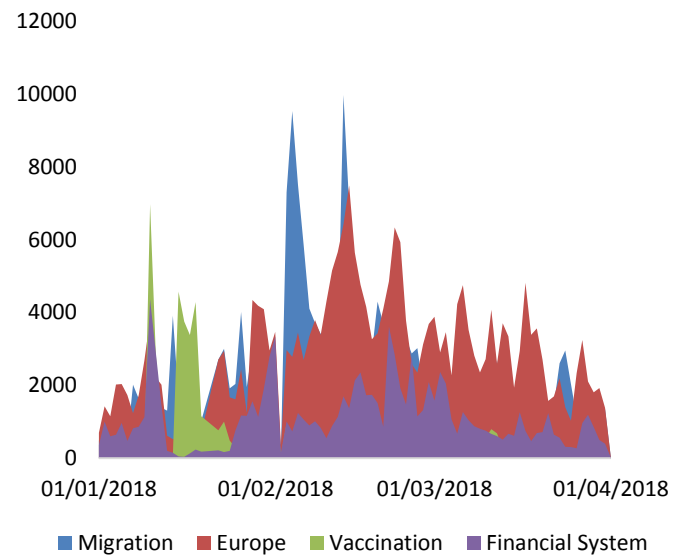
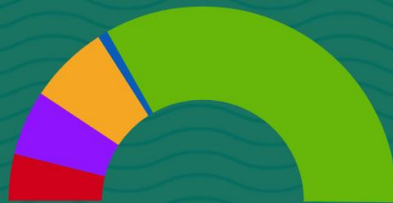


Figure 13 - Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre.

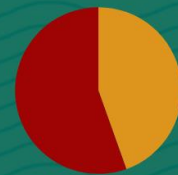
Three main narratives were used during the electoral campaign (figure 14). Migration was described in a relatively negative manner, with more than 55 per cent of messages using derogatory terms. Discussions on European institution were mostly focused on the Euro and its effects on Italian economy in the last two decades.

NARRATIVES

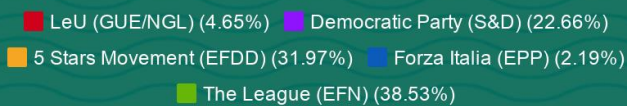
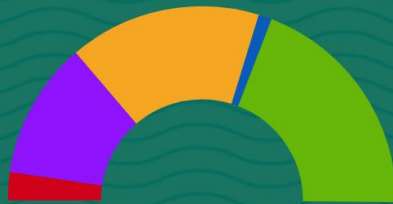
Migration



Attitude Towards Migration



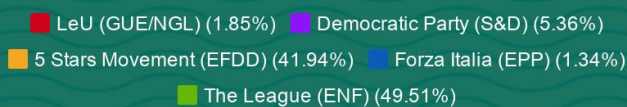
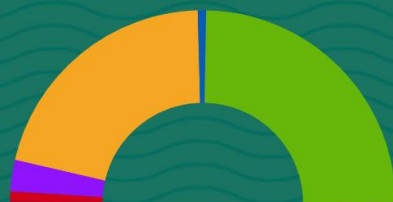
Europe



Posts on Europe



Financial System



Based on Twitter Activity from
1 January to 5 March 2018



Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre

Figure 14 - Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre

During the electoral campaign, misinformation, disinformation, and factual stories were embedded together into more complex narratives. Citizens' vulnerabilities were targeted with an overtly anti-elite and anti-media campaign that embraced strong positions on: migration management; élites vs. people; EU and financial Institutions; international alliances; and intolerance against specific groups.

Supporters of the 5 Stars Movement and the League were effective in shifting the news agenda towards specific stories, such as immigration, corruption, or state's failure in protecting those in need (low income families; unemployed; retired; etc.), during the last months of the electoral campaign.

Figure 15 shows the 4000 most shared news on social media during the electoral campaign. They were divided into three groups:

- Fake, for those containing false information, as controlled by fact-checkers.
- Problematic, for those with misleading, oversimplified, half-truth contents, and partisan op-ed designed to manipulate readers' perceptions.
- Factual based news.

This complex information environment was used to push narratives, amplified by cross-platform engagement. False stories, which constitute on average one third of the total narrative, served as "honeypot" to attract users' attention in an oversaturated information environment, and to periodically reinforce group's engagement and loyalty. Problematic content (half-truth, oversimplified, misleading) was used to facilitate partisan message deliverance, while factual based content was used to reinforce the narrative against external attacks, like fact-checkers or mainstream media.

Figure 15 shows the main identified narratives: migration; European Institutions; attacks against political opponents; Intolerance (against LGBTQI, anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, anti-minorities, etc.). Electoral Fraud stories came up during the last days of the campaign and represent the "control group",²⁹⁰ as it was made-up mostly by fake content. It consists of a "traditional" conspiracy theory that got no credibility and was immediately "debunked" by fact-checkers.

²⁹⁰ A control group in a scientific experiment is a group separated from the rest of the experiment, where the independent variable being tested cannot influence the results.

Total Interactions



■ Fake (33.47%)
■ Problematic (29.45%)
■ Factual (37.08%)

Composition of the 4000 Most Shared News per Narrative



Migration



■ Fake (25.73%) ■ Problematic (37.83%) ■ Factual (36.44%)



Europe



■ Fake (20.27%) ■ Problematic (49.33%) ■ Factual (30.40%)



Intolerance



■ Total Fake (18.30%) ■ Total Problematic (21.96%) ■ Factual (59.74%)



Attacks Against Political Opponents



■ Total Fake (33.92%) ■ Total Problematic (14%) ■ Factual (52.09%)



Electoral Fraud Conspiracy



■ Fake (74.95%) ■ Problematic (5.45%) ■ Factual (19.60%)

Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre; Buzzsumo for SkyTg24

Figure 15 - Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre; Buzzsumo for SkyTg24

7. Network Mapping of Italian Political Areas. Methodology

The goal was to provide a graphical representation of the communities active on the social media in supporting political parties and leaders. The social network investigated was Twitter.

Starting from a root set of influential political accounts, almost equally distributed among the five main political areas which competed in the elections, their neighbourhood network was explored in order to retrieve the most active users who followed or retweeted them during the period January / March 2018 (11 weeks).

The results have been mapped into a graph where the nodes are all the Twitter accounts (including the root set), and the edges connecting them are weighted proportionally to the number of observed retweets.

Afterwards, using Gephi,²⁹¹ the graph has been partitioned with the Louvain algorithm²⁹² so to identify communities, and rendered using a force-directed layout to better highlight the degree of intra-community and inter-community relationships (figure 8).

Root set:

@orfini	@emmabonino	@gasparripdl	@staff_M_Fedriga
@pdnetwork	@carlosibilia	@GuidoCrosetto	@DaniloToninelli
@LegaSalvini	@GiorgiaMeloni	@maumartina	@AntoniniMauro
@civati	@forza_italia	@NFratoianni	@carlaruocco1
@stefanoesposito	@ManlioDS	@Ignazio_LaRussa	@distefanoTW
@matteorenzi	@CasaPoundItalia	@DSantanche	@FratellidItalia
@beppe_grillo	@lauraboldrini	@RobertoMaroni_	@PietroGrasso
@renatobrunetta	@AlemannoTW	@AndreaOrlandosp	@zaiapresidente
@Roberto_Fico	@matteosalvinimi	@BeaLorenzin	@virginiaraggi
@serracchiani	@AndreaRomano9	@bobogiac	@CarloCalenda
@luigidimaio	@Mov5Stelle	@meh	@Noiconsalvini
@pbersani	@emanuelefiano	@mariannamadia	@PossibileIt
@dariofrance	@robersperanza	@Storace	@berlusconi
@giamma71	@borghi_claudio	@RobertoFioreFN	@liberi_uguali
@mara_carfagna	@PaoloGentiloni	@ale_dibattista	

²⁹¹ Gephi is an open-source network analysis and visualization software package.

²⁹² It is an algorithm for detecting communities in networks.

7.1 List of the Most Influential News Outlets per Area

Using the same procedure described a set of about 2500 active supporters has been identified (about 500 for each political area).

Then the timelines of these supporters have been examined in order to retrieve all the links they had shared during the period under exam (January / March 2018). The so collected links, grouped by source, have been associated to the political areas supported by the selected accounts.

7.2 Most Influential Media Outlets per Area

The data obtained has been used as baseline. They have been filtered on a per-user basis using two different criteria:

1. the first table includes the media sources most shared by the prominent accounts present in the root set.
2. The second table includes the media sources most shared by accounts with more than 5000 followers.

7.3 Most Relevant Topics per Week

The tweets obtained from the monitoring process were grouped by day and week and subsequently used as input²⁹³ for a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)²⁹⁴ – a bottom-up topic detection tool. The main objective was to obtain a list of topics that were discussed along the timeline of the pre-election period and their evolution. We tested different settings for the system, with regard to the number of iterations for the model training, the topics to split the data into and number of terms to consider in the description of the topic. These dimensions must be specified prior to running the algorithm. The best setting was obtained for 30 topics, described by 100 words, obtained through 200 iterations of the algorithm.

The topics were then identified and labelled through manual inspection.

7.4 Trends on General Keywords Corresponding to Known Narratives

An analysis of the trends present in different areas was performed by matching the keywords and keyword combinations pertaining to those areas. The analysis of these trends was done both on the entire set of tweets, as well as on the set of tweets corresponding to the users whose political affinity could be inferred. The following keyword combinations were used for each of the topics:

²⁹³ The original tweets went through a pre-processing stage, where they were lower cased, where stop words, as well as all non-alphanumeric signs, were removed.

²⁹⁴ David M. Blei, Andrew Y. Ng, Michael I. Jordan, *Latent Dirichlet Allocation*, Journal of Machine Learning Research, vol. 3, 2003.

- **Migration** (immigrati; rifugiati; clandestini; sbarchi+clandestini; sbarchi+immigrati; sbarchi+migranti; sbarchi+africani; ong+migranti; ong+taxi; ong+immigrati; ong+clandestini; immigrati+malattie; clandestini+malattie; iussoli; boldrini);
- **Europe** (eu; europa; commissione europea; noeuro; juncker; mogherini; merkel; euro) ;
- **Vaccination** (vaccini; case+farmaceutiche);
- **Financial System** (banche; risparmiatori; Etruria; consip; soros; negozi+chiusi, negozi+domenica).

7.5 Trends on General Keywords Corresponding to Known "Fake Stories"

An analysis of the trends corresponding to known "fake stories" was performed by matching the keywords and keyword combinations pertaining to those areas. The analysis of these trends was done both on the entire set of tweets, as well as on the set of tweets corresponding to the users whose political affinity could be inferred. The following keyword combinations were used for each of these stories:

- sacchetti+spesa (January);
- Trenitalia+biglietto (February);
- Macerata+Mastropietro (February);
- Sicilia+schede+pd (March);
- "Mentre i profughi stanno negli hotel a tre stelle, guardate in che condizioni sono i terremotati" (February);
- pensione+reversibilit  (February);
- bambini+imparino+arabo (January);
- padoan+INPS+muoiono+tardi;
- pd+antimafia+idagata+mafia+paolino;
- italiani+caritas+aiutiamo+immigrati.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

Production of misleading or false content is not limited to the current historical context, but has always been inherent in human communication. In times of socio-political crisis, as those induced by globalisation and rapid technological change, the whole social fabric weakens, and widely accepted institutions appear unable to abide by the social contract and respond to citizens' needs for security and prosperity.²⁹⁵ This weakness exposes society's vulnerabilities and makes it susceptible to hostile intrusion and attacks.

Technological advances have provided producers and sharer of distorted information with new powerful means to reach an ever-wider audience. Social networks, in fact, are able to attract and engage with millions of people by giving them a platform where disinformation can spread exponentially fast, often being uncritically picked-up and redistributed to an even larger audience by the traditional media.

Since the beginning of the century, Russia has allegedly used cyber-attacks, disinformation, and financial influence campaigns to meddle with the internal affairs of most European countries.²⁹⁶ The Russian practice is based firstly on the correlation between the strength of each country's institutions and its susceptibility to Russian influence. Thus, the strategy may vary depending on the targeted country: Russia commonly acts to exert influence over pliant governments or weaken pro-Western leaders in former Soviet controlled countries, while in the rest of Europe it would continue to undermine NATO and the EU, by amplifying existing political and social discord.

Hostile narratives, targeting exposed vulnerabilities with emotionally charged contents, are designed to erode trust in mainstream media and democratic institutions. They feed people with true and false information, thoroughly organised per theme. They are primarily focused on social issues and encourage cross-platform sharing to create content that has the potential to go viral and reach mass audiences. Topics are presented in order to reinforce community and cultural pride, exploiting tribalism within each targeted community, in particular preceding electoral events.

It is thus not surprising that elections have become a target for hybrid-warfare. Although the electoral voting systems have not been compromised yet, attacks against auxiliary services have been attempted in some countries.²⁹⁷ For the reasons discussed in this report, deterrence, citizens' awareness and media literacy offer a more convincing approach than relying on police enforcement alone. In fact, certain measures to mitigate the negative effects of disinformation - e.g. raising awareness among the population when an attack is in progress and exposing the tools, techniques and intentions of such campaigns - have been proven to be somehow

²⁹⁵ Daudi Mwita Nyamaka, *Social Contract Theory of John Locke (1932-1704) in the Contemporary World*, St. Augustine University Law Journal, 2001, Vol. 1 Issue 1.

²⁹⁶ Clint Watts, So What Did We Learn? Looking Back on Four Years of Russia's Cyber-Enabled "Active Measures", Alliance for Securing Democracy, 18 January 2018.

²⁹⁷ NIS Cooperation Group, *Compendium on Cyber Security of Election Technology*, CG Publication 03/2018.

effective in Northern Europe.²⁹⁸ In this sense, it could be argued that the lack of awareness of being exposed to disinformation can be considered a vulnerability itself, in the same way as the lack of a coordinated response when aware of being exposed to disinformation.

Building up on the existing initiatives taken by the European institutions and member states against disinformation, a set of three mutually reinforcing policy options is proposed, addressing:

- **Monitoring Hostile Narratives.** Disinformation has been incorporated into complex hybrid-warfare strategies. For this reason, a systematic monitoring of hostile narratives, aimed at better identifying and addressing exposed citizens' vulnerabilities, their scope and distribution, is of the utmost importance. The information gathered in this way could be used to build a "Hostile Narratives Index", which will help to measure and compare different vulnerabilities, providing a basis to develop more precise and targeted actions.
- **Regulating "Personalisation Algorithms".** Online platforms thrived in an unregulated environment. Personalised content and related use of targeted advertising, originally conceived for commercial purposes, has proven to be instrumental in forging specific realities for each user by subtly shaping customised "information diets" and worldviews (e.g. creation of online echo chambers, discriminatory content against particular social groups, information asymmetries between service providers and consumers, etc.). The amount of false and misleading content and relative narratives spread may be reduced shifting from the current "visibility reward model" to a "quality reward model", by providing non-personalised results when it comes to specific topics (e.g. science, elections, politics, etc.). This would make it more expensive to reach a precise target audience, and thus disempower hostile narratives that could not rely anymore on tailored data. While much of these concerns are simply the result of rapid technological change, this must not prevent regulatory interventions aimed at safeguarding the rights and legal protections that citizens are entitled to. This needs to be accompanied by clear mechanisms of accountability due to the opaque nature of personalisation algorithms and their potential to generate consequences that are detrimental to society on a number of levels, as sketched out in this report.
- **Authenticating Cryptographic Content.** Technology has made possible to fabricate manipulated content nearly indistinguishable from "ground truth". Deep fakes, a new AI-based technology, allow essentially anyone to create, for instance, lifelike videos of politicians or influential people saying or doing things they have never said or done.²⁹⁹ Online content may then be digitally signed with a cryptographic key embedded into the file metadata to be later decrypted by browsers or platforms, making it also inspectable by regulators or the general public. This would certify the originating source and help to ensure more transparency and enhance trustworthiness of published material.

²⁹⁸ Chloe Colliver, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, Jonathan Birdwell, *Smearing Sweden: International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election*, London, ISD, 2018.

²⁹⁹ Brian Klaas, *Deepfakes are coming. We're not ready*, Washington Post, 14 May 2019.

Although it may sound like a truism, it is important to recall that any expert understanding of emotional manipulation and distorted perceptions is unlikely to be effective in fending off disinformation unless it is combined with concerted and sustained efforts to promote awareness raising, community engagement, empowerment, and education, including media and 'algorithmic literacy'. In rapidly and dynamically evolving environments, increasing citizens' resilience against malicious attacks is, ultimately, of paramount importance to protect our open democratic societies, social values and individual rights and freedoms.

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