

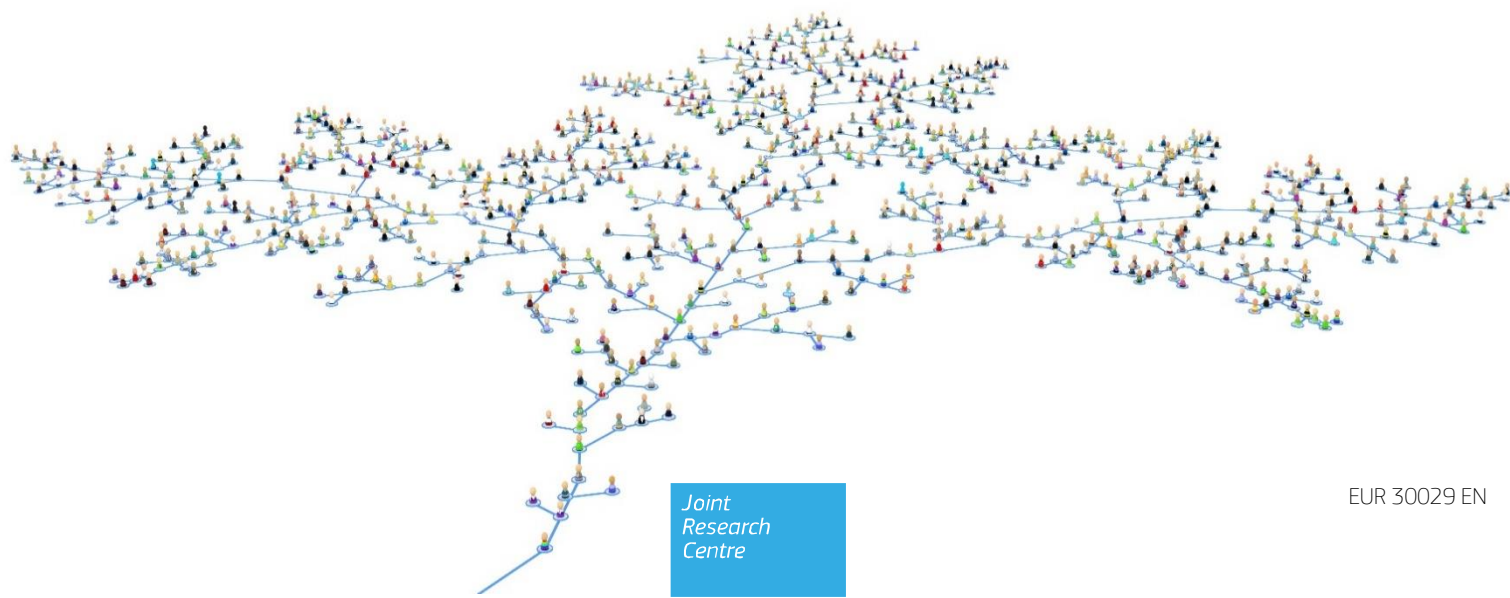
JRC TECHNICAL REPORT

Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities (II): from Disinformation to Hostile Narratives

Case Studies: Italy, France, Spain.

2020

Massimo FLORE



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Contact information

Name: Massimo FLORE

Address: Marsveldstraat 21 Rue du Champ de Mars 1050 Brussels

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses how disinformation campaigns have evolved into more complex hostile narratives, taking Italy, France, and Spain as case studies to prove what has been observed and determined from analytical and numerical research.

During the last years, malicious actors have been able to rely on much more sophisticated and organized disinformation campaigns in an attempt to manipulate citizens' perceptions. Technological advances have provided producers and sharer of distorted information with new powerful means to reach an ever-wider audience.

One of the reasons this system of propaganda and disinformation is so effective and successful is that it deceives ordinary citizens into sharing false stories within their own circle of friends and acquaintances, while platforms' algorithms have the capacity to pick these messages up very quickly and amplify it on an unprecedented scale. Most of this content is not designed to channel people into a particular direction, but to create confusion and erode the trust in our media, institutions and eventually, democracy itself.

Hostile narratives target feelings and emotions and touch upon specific social vulnerabilities. They are made of true and false information, where the narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves. They rely on negatively charged emotions, like fear or anger, in order to lower the means of rational self-defence and trigger self-survival instincts, creating a psychological condition that makes the brain respond positively rather than negatively to bigoted statements and divisive rhetoric.

It should be said that public figures and the media in recent years have played a key role in disseminating false and unsupported information. There has been a dramatic rise in the number and type of news programs available, including a troubling number of partisan programs that often feature false or exaggerated information.

In the last decades, foreign interference has been pushed by the belief that by breaking the Euro-Atlantic link, the West would end as a strategic entity. Russian military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014, China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative in Eurasia and the mosaic of sovereigntist and populist parties that have revamped anti-Americanism and anti-globalism, combined with sudden asymmetric cyberwarfare, can describe the most formidable and dangerous challenge that democracies are facing since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This report will highlight in chapter 2 how hostile narratives target citizens' vulnerabilities exploiting fear mongering using algorithmic content curation. In Chapter 3, the case studies will describe how different disinformation campaigns have been used in Italy, France and Spain, while chapter 4 will provide examples on how hostile disinformation narratives were employed in France and Italy.

"Reality, however utopian, is something from which people feel the need of taking pretty frequent holidays"
(Aldous Huxley)

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1 Disinformation Campaigns as Epidemic Contagion

Over the past years, disinformation dramatically increased all over the world. According to a recent study,¹ in 2019 Social Media manipulation campaigns have taken place in 70 countries, with a 46% increment compared to 2018, and there is evidence that at least a political party or national government attempted to shape public attitudes in each country. Disinformation campaigns have become much more sophisticated and organized. Malicious actors have understood how platform's algorithms work and are using this knowledge to target citizens' vulnerabilities, discredit political opponents, divert attention towards specific hostile narratives, and in authoritarian regimes, to drown out dissenting opinions and suppress fundamental human rights.

Disinformation and propaganda are so effective because they deceive ordinary citizens (also referred to as "unwitting agents"),² into sharing them to friends and acquaintances, while platforms' algorithms quickly amplify false stories on an unprecedented scale. In an information environment characterized by an oversaturation of content and algorithms designed to increase views and shares, hostile narratives can quickly go viral by appealing to personal biases.³

To try to understand how false beliefs can survive, many communication theorists and social scientists have devised models in which the spread of ideas is equated with an epidemic contagion. In a contagion model, ideas are like viruses that pass from one mind to another.⁴ In a network, formed by nodes and lines that indicate individuals and social connections, sometimes false beliefs persist and even spread to communities where everyone is deeply committed to collect and share factual information. In these cases, the problem is not reckless trust, but something much deeper, related to personal belief systems that determine decisions and shape biases. Experts argue that this is the result of how the brain perceives the world as divided into objects located in space and over time, but is not always able to faithfully capture its structure.⁵ In contemporary oversaturated information environment, perceptions are active constructions that have been influenced by social media filters that tailor information, where algorithms, pushed by personal bias and misperception, create individual realities.⁶

Over the years, many rich and powerful groups have always had interest in influencing public beliefs, including those on scientific facts. According to a naïve idea, when industry tries to influence scientific beliefs, it simply hires corrupt scientists, and sometimes it happens. However, a careful study of historical cases shows that there are much more refined - and probably more effective - strategies adopted by industry, nations and other malicious actors. A classic example is the American tobacco industry, which in the 1950s developed new techniques to counter the growing consensus on the fatal damage of smoking. In the fifties and

¹ Samantha Bradshaw, Philip N. Howard, *The Global Disinformation Disorder: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*, Working Paper 2019.2. Oxford, UK, Project on Computational Propaganda, 2019.

² Kate Starbird, *Disinformation's spread: bots, trolls and all of us*, *Nature* 571, n.449, 2019.

³ Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia, Filippo Menczer, *Biases Make People Vulnerable to Misinformation Spread by Social Media*, *Scientific American*, 21 June 2018.

⁴ For More info on complex contagion in social networks: Petter Törnberg, *Echo chambers and viral misinformation: Modeling fake news as complex contagion*, *PloS one* vol. 13, 2018; Joe Brown, Amanda Broderick, Nick Lee, *Word of mouth communication within online communities: Conceptualizing the online social network*, *Journal of interactive marketing*, n.21, 2007; Walter Quattrociocchi, Rosaria Conte, Elena Lodi, *Opinions manipulation: Media, power and gossip*, *Advances in Complex Systems*, n.14, 2011; Damon Centola, Michael Macy, *Complex Contagions and the Weakness of Long Ties*, *American Journal of Sociology*, issue 113, no. 3, November 2007; Golnaz Ghasemiesfeh, Roozbeh Ebrahimi, Jie Gao, *Complex contagion and the weakness of long ties in social networks: Revisited*, *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Electronic Commerce*, 2013.

⁵ Donald Hoffman, *The Interface Theory of Perception*, *The Stevens' Handbook of Experimental Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience*, C. Psychon Bull Rev, n. 22, 2015.

⁶ Bobby Duffy, *The Perils of Perception: Why We're Wrong About Nearly Everything*, Atlantic Books, London, 2018.

sixties, the Tobacco Institute published "Tobacco and Health", a bi-monthly newsletter that reported only the scientific researches stating that tobacco was not harmful, or that highlighted the uncertainty about its effects on health. The pamphlets adopted what is called "selective sharing".⁷ This method consists in taking authentic and independent scientific research, and selecting them by presenting only the evidence in favour of the preferred position. Using variants of this model, selective sharing can be incredibly effective in influencing what an audience of non-experts comes to believe in scientific facts. In other words, malicious actors can use grains of truth to give an impression of uncertainty or even convince people of false claims. Worse still, propagandists are constantly developing increasingly sophisticated methods to manipulate public beliefs.⁸

In recent years, paid trolls and automated accounts were used to give the impression that some false beliefs were widely shared.⁹ This strategy has fuelled disinformation campaigns designed to manipulate public opinion on a large scale, influencing opinions not through rational arguments or evidence, but by driving the social dissemination of knowledge. In a complex network of social changes, people are more susceptible to bad information and plots. Malicious actors who want to accentuate tensions understand these trends in society, and design content with which they hope to arouse the anger or enthusiasm of targeted users so that the public becomes the messenger. Most of this content is not meant to direct people in a particular direction, but to create confusion, to dominate and undermine the institutions of democracy, from the electoral system to journalism.¹⁰

Users design their identity on social platforms to feel connected "to others": whether they are political parties, a religious group, no-vax parents, or activists committed to climate change, they do not realize to have been targeted and often become a vehicle of disinformation dissemination.¹¹ Manipulated information, using a mix of emotionality and rationality, has recently become so pervasive and powerful to be able to rewrite reality. 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 reached 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, and through a limited number of passages, an information may reach very distant points, and in a few hours can become viral, regardless of its correctness.¹²

⁷ Jieun Shin, Kjerstin Thorson, *Partisan Selective Sharing: The Biased Diffusion of Fact-Checking Messages on Social Media*, Journal of Communication, Volume 67, Issue 2, April 2017.

⁸ David A. Broniatowski, Amelia M. Jamison, SiHua Qi, Lulwah AlKulaib, Tao Chen, Adrian Benton, Sandra C. Quinn, and Mark Dredze, *Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate*, American Journal of Public Health, n. 108, 2018.

⁹ Chengcheng Shao, Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia, Onur Varol, Kai-Cheng Yang, Alessandro Flammini, Filippo Menczer, *The Spread of Low-Credibility Content by Social Bots*, Nature, Commun 9, 4787, 20 November 2018.

¹⁰ Yoachi Benkler, Rachel Faris, Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹¹ Emily Van Duyn, Jessica Collier, *Priming and Fake News: The Effects of Elite Discourse on Evaluations of News Media*, in Mass Communication and Society, Vol. 22, n. 1, 2019.

¹² Massimo Flore, Alexandra Balahur, Aldo Podavini, Marco Verile, *Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities to Disinformation and Data-Driven Propaganda*, EUR 29741 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019.

2 Hostile Narratives

During the centuries, human societies have constantly reorganized. At the turn of the nineteenth centuries, the industrial revolution fragmented the communities as people moved to work in big cities, at the beginning of the 20th century the unravelling of empires redesigned nations and identities, and in the 1930s, the great depression destroyed economic security and the future prospects of the population. After the Second World War, technological innovation pushed globalisation, work automation, and intercontinental flights. Decolonization and the end of the cold war triggered socio-political volatility, while climate change and population aging were deeply affecting demography and resources. For many people, the speed and scope of such changes were alienating, causing profound upheavals in their social lives.¹³

As the sense of self is a fundamental organizing principle for perceptions, feelings, attitudes and actions, self-insecurity affects people's decisions regarding the choice for political leadership, pushing them to legitimize and support leaders who present more authoritarian instances.¹⁴ Online platforms are the ideal place to reduce the discomfort of self-insecurity: they offer continuous access to an unlimited amount of information, carefully selected by algorithms or by people in closed groups, which mainly confirms their identity. The confirmation bias is particularly strong in situations of uncertainty and polarized society, because people want to be surrounded by those who think like them, in order to have continuous confirmation of their identity and vision of the world, creating a self-sufficient universe.¹⁵

Today's society is particularly vulnerable to disinformation operations due to the effect of three different factors:¹⁶

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

Disinformation has appeared online since the end of the 1990s, however, it is only after the establishment of social platforms and their algorithms meant to organize content and identify users' preferences, that information (mis- and dis-) could be employed with sheer accuracy. Disinformation strategies have evolved from "hack and dump" cyber-attacks; sharing conspiracy or made-up stories, into a more complex ecosystem where hostile narratives are used to feed people with true and false information, ready to be "weaponized" when necessary.

Hostile narratives target feelings and emotions and touch upon particular social vulnerabilities. They are composed by true and false information, where the narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves. The different narratives may even be in contradiction one with the other, as they address different population groups. Individuals select 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. Most of the content used to build these hostile

¹³ For more info, see chapter 3 of: Massimo FLORE, *Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities...*

¹⁴ Michael A. Hogg, *From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes*, in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 23, n. 5, 2014.

¹⁵ Michael A. Hogg, *Uncertainty-Identity Theory*, in *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, Vol. 2, Sage Publications, 2012.

¹⁶ For more info, see chapter 3 of: Massimo Flore, *Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities...*

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.¹⁷

In a world overloaded with information, so called “fake stories” are designed to attract attention. Although many are visibly quite fantastical and implausible, they deceive the heuristic accuracy judgements, influencing personal beliefs and actions. 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”.¹⁸ It is the “illusory truth effect”, which is the mechanism that confers believability to stories via previous exposure, despite their low level of overall believability.¹⁹ Repetition increases the ease with which statements are processed, which in turn is used heuristically to infer accuracy.²⁰

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”.²¹

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.²² 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”²³ 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.²⁴ For this reason, particularly during political crises, social media users not only share

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Emanuele Baldacci, Dario Buono, Fabrice Gras, *Fake News and information asymmetries: data as public good*, Dataforpolicy.org, London, 2017.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.

²² Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sian Aral, *The spread of trues and false news online*, Science, vol. 359, Issue 6380, March 2016.

²³ 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.

²⁴ Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, Science, Vol. 185, Issue 4157, Sep 1974.

content from reliable sources, but also extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, fraudulent, and other forms of unsubstantiated content.²⁵

2.1 The Fear Factory

To be effective, hostile narratives target feelings and emotions and touch upon particular social vulnerabilities. They rely on negatively charged emotions like fear or anger, to lower rational self-defence by triggering the brain survival mode, which associate these feelings to immediate lethal danger.²⁶ Not everyone reacts at the same way to the same input, as our reactions are influenced by our belief system.

This is deeply connected to a specific feature of human beings: the unique awareness of their own mortality.²⁷ According to the Terror Management Theory, the inevitability of death creates an existential terror and anxiety that is always residing below the surface. In order to manage this terror, humans adopt cultural worldviews — like religions, political ideologies, and national identities — that act as a buffer by instilling life with meaning and value.²⁸

Through hostile narratives, malicious actors use fear mongering by constantly emphasizing existential threats, creating a psychological condition that makes the brain respond positively rather than negatively to bigoted statements and divisive rhetoric. When people are reminded of their own mortality, they will more strongly defend those who share their worldviews and national or ethnic identity, and act out more aggressively towards those who do not.

Fear overlaps other emotions and is a vital response to physical and emotional danger. It has strong roots in human evolution, enabling people to protect themselves from legitimate threats, which in the ancestral world frequently resulted in life-or-death consequences. In the modern world, individuals often fear situations where the stakes are much lower, but their body and brain may still treat the threat as lethal. This can trigger an extreme, and often unnecessary, fight-flight-or-freeze response.²⁹

Hostile narratives in particular, exploit three specific fears:

- Fear of losing health.
- Fear of losing wealth.
- Fear of losing identity.

They all refer to the experience of being deprived of something to which they believe are entitled. It is the discontent felt comparing their position in life to others who they feel are equal or inferior but have unfairly had more success than they have. This kind of deprivation is specifically referred to as “relative,” as opposed to “absolute”, because the feeling is often

²⁵ Vidya Narayanan, Vlad Barash, John Kelly, Bence Kollanyi, *Polarization, partisanship and junk news consumption over social media in the US*, Comprop, February 2018.

²⁶ Harvard Medical School, *Understanding the Stress Response*, Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard, May 2018.

²⁷ Robert W. Firestone, *Joyce Catlett Beyond Death Anxiety: Achieving Life-Affirming Death Awareness*, Springer, New York, 2009.

²⁸ Clay Routledge, Matthew Vess, *Handbook of Terror Management Theory*, Academic Press, 2018.

²⁹ Marta Marchlewska, Aleksandra Cichocka, Orestis Panayiotou, Kevin Castellanos, Jude Batayneh, *Populism as Identity Politics: Perceived In-Group Disadvantage, Collective Narcissism, and Support for Populism*, Social Psychological and Personality Science, no. 2, March 2018.

based on a skewed perception of what one is entitled to. This is connected with what experts call "collective narcissism", which is an unrealistic shared belief in the greatness of one's national group. It often occurs when a group who believes it represents the "true identity" of a nation - "ingroup" - perceives itself as being disadvantaged compared to outgroups who are getting ahead of them "unrightfully" and for this reason perceived as a threat.³⁰

Recent studies have found that both liberals and conservatives openly endorse discriminatory behaviours against one another, including harassment, destruction of property, and more generally, the denial of the outgroup members' basic rights.³¹

Malicious actors identify and target citizens' vulnerabilities by describing specific vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants, International Institutions, LGBTQI community, pro-women equality, black lives matters, Muslims, climate change activists, etc.) as active threats to personal wellbeing or identity, implying that liberal democracies are no longer able to respect their part of the social contract, thus suggesting citizens to seek government alternatives capable of coping with these imminent threats.³²

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.³³

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

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".³⁴

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 secular 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ Right-wing mainstream parties have also seen their consensus being drained by populists, when they abandoned their advocacy for

³⁰ Marta Marchlewska, *Populism as...*

³¹ Geoffrey A. Wetherell, Mark J. Brandt, Christine Reyna, *Discrimination across the Ideological Divide: The Role of Value Violations and Abstract Values in Discrimination by Liberals and Conservatives*, Social Psychological and Personality Science, Sage, 2013.

³² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, The Lawbook Exchange, London, 2010.

³³ David Blankenhorn, *The Top 14 Causes of Political Polarization*, The American Interest, 16 May 2018.

³⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The...*

³⁵ Martin A. Schain, *Shifting Tides: Radical-Right Populism and Immigration Policy in Europe and the United States*, Migration Policy Institute, August 2018.

³⁶ 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.

free market for a nativist protection of welfare state, reserved only for the "deserving", thus excluding immigrants and Muslims.

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 globalization 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.³⁷

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.³⁸ The dramatic radicalisation of intergroup conflicts has increased people feeling that an external enemy, whose nature may vary, threatens their community, 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.³⁹

The feeling of having enough of democracy 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 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.⁴⁰

2.2 A Business Model Based on Personalised Content

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 even

³⁷ Eric Kaufmann, *Good Fences...*

³⁸ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

³⁹ Sergio Salvatore, Viviana Fini, *Symbolic universes...*

⁴⁰ Eric Kaufmann, *Good Fences...*

more, while alternative news ecosystems fuelled by extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial content have flourished.⁴¹

Algorithms are central in spreading manipulated content, as they can be purposefully exploited to distribute polarizing political messages. Based on preferences and behaviour, highly personalised algorithms select what information to show in the news feed, where disinformation spread fast among homogeneous groups.⁴² Personalised content 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",⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

Online platforms business model relies on pushing contents that generates engagement, allowing them to sell this "attention" to advertisers.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

2.3 The New Gatekeepers of Social Reality

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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ This undermine the effectiveness of fact-checking, as in many

⁴¹ Michela Del Vicario, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Fabio Petroni, Antonio Scala, *The Spreading of Misinformation Online*, PNAS, n. 113(3), January 2016.

⁴² Vidya Narayanan, Vlad Barash, *Polarization, Partisanship...*

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Brent Mittelstadt, Patrick Allo, Mariarosaria Taddeo, *The Ethics of Algorithms: Mapping the Debate*, Big Data & Society, Vol. 3(2), February 2017.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ Zeynep Tufekci, *Russian Meddling Is a Symptom, Not the Disease*, The New York Times, 3 October 2018.

⁴⁷ James Carson, *what is fake...*

⁴⁸ David M.J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, *The Science of Fake News*, Science, vol. 359 issue 6380, March 2018.

circumstances people tend to remember how they feel about information and not the context, thus confusing familiarity with reliability.⁴⁹

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 number 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.⁵⁰ Clearly, a misleading coverage of a crime contributes to a widespread misperception of crime rate in a specific area.⁵¹

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. 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. 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.

The insufficient mediation between the source and the message has led many people assume to be knowledgeable, entitled to their own truth, supported by Google or Wikipedia, and by the ease with which they can express opinions on social networks. There is so much information around that people think they absorb it only by immersion.⁵² People with little knowledge are afraid of educated people and develop hostility to knowledge.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

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 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.

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America*, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

⁵¹ German Lopez, *Americans don't know crime has plummeted. In fact, they think it's gone up*, Vox, 10 October 2016.

⁵² Daniel M. Wegner, Adrian F. Ward, *The Internet Has Become the External Hard Drive for Our Memories*, Scientific American, Volume 309, Issue 6, 2013.

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ 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.

3 From Disinformation to Hostile Narratives

In this complex information environment, disinformation campaigns have become more sophisticated, with targeted messages based on personal users' data and preferences. Hostile narratives are built with a careful blend of three different elements:

False stories. They serve as "honeypot" to attract users' attention and to periodically reinforce group's engagement and loyalty.

Problematic stories. They include misleading, oversimplified, bad-reporting, half-truth contents, and partisan op-ed designed to manipulate readers' perceptions.

Factual based stories. Essential to provide familiarity and sense of consistency to the whole narrative.

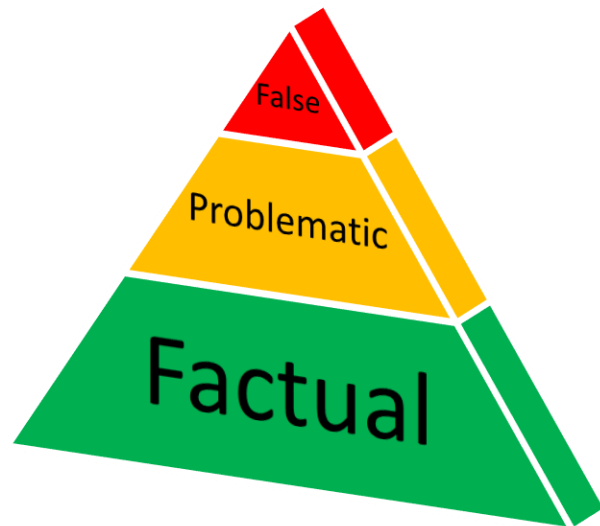


Figure 1 - Hostile Narratives Composition

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of identified false stories, as the countermeasures put in place have effectively helped platforms to recognise and take down a large number of misinformative content, while global awareness has made citizens more careful with what they were reading. However, the distinction between "false" and "factual" information has proven not to be flexible enough to completely describe the continuously evolving information environment. Thus, the need for introducing a third classification category to include "problematic" information, which are not necessarily false, but serve – directly or indirectly – a hostile narrative.

3.1 Methodology

In order to monitor the narratives, it was established a dataset of all the articles shared online in Italy, France and Spain from 1 January 2019 to 30 October 2019, using the data provided by BuzzSumo.⁵⁵ From this database were considered only the first thousand most shared articles on social platforms (Twitter, Facebook) for each topic in each country, for a total of 9000 articles reviewed.

Three topics were monitored, by using the keywords below:

European Institutions.

- ITA: unione europea + commissione europea + parlamento europeo + euro + UE + junker
- FRA: commission européenne + parlement européen + union européenne + UE + euro + junker
- ESP: comision europea + parlamento europeo + union europea + UE + euro + junker

Migration.

- ITA: immigrati + rifugiati + clandestini + sbarchi + scafisti + porti chiusi + iussoli + ius culturae + immigrati malattie + open arms + carola + rackete + ong + taxi del mare
- FRA: migrants + réfugié + ONG + Rackete + immigration + illégale + clandestine + droit du sol
- ESP: ONG + migrantes + inmigrantes + refugiados + ilegales + moros + clandestino + rackete

Intolerance.

- ITA: islam + musulmani + invasione + stop invasione + femminismo + soros + ebrei + sionisti + israele + sharia
- FRA: islamistes + islam + musulman + Frères Musulmans + voile intégral + Juifs + LGBT + étalement masculin + mariage pour tous + PMA pour toutes + même sexe + famille traditionnelle + couple gay + famille naturelle + élites cosmopolites + charia + soros
- ESP: feminista + musulman + matrimonio gay + homosexual + yihad + magrebies + violacion inversa + lgbt + islam + soros

These articles were then classified as: false (as reported by fact-checkers); problematic (misleading, half-truths, allusive, bad reporting, and malicious op-ed); factual (based on factual reporting). Satirical websites were excluded from the dataset.

A further analysis was reserved for articles produced by Russian state-controlled information outlets, Sputnik and RT, in the language of the monitored countries. From these sources were considered only the articles reporting false information (as established by independent fact-checkers) or problematic, and compared with the general information production.

⁵⁵ BuzzSumo is an online content marketing software.

3.2 Case Studies: Italy, France, Spain

Three EU countries were monitored for hostile narratives during 2019. As expected, due to the very nature of Internet, a preliminary analysis showed no clear evidence of a centralised coordination of disinformation campaigns. However, among the least shared articles (below 5000 total shares), a consistent number of false and problematic content contributed in creating a background noise and keeping familiarity with specific narratives to a scattered but vulnerable audience.

According to analysts,⁵⁶ most of the false stories were pushed by bots and automated accounts, making them trending topics and tricked platforms algorithms to recommend them to an even wider public. However, malicious actors seemed to rely more on problematic content in an effort to remain undetected, even if this was temporarily undermining their ability to gain followers and spread divisive political messages.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, as shown in the figures in the next pages, the information environment, albeit with some differences, can still be considered “healthy”, with most of the shared contents of a factual nature.

Among the many disinformation campaigns that targeted citizens’ in the monitored countries, two examples were chosen and analysed in chapter 4.

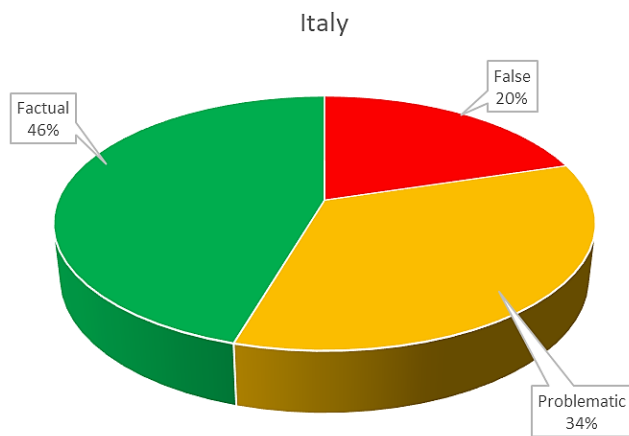
⁵⁶ Marco Camisani-Calzolari, *The Fake News Bible: A guide to fake news*, Independent, London, 2018.

⁵⁷ Jack Stubbs, *Russian operatives sacrifice followers to stay under cover on Facebook*, Reuters, 24 October 2019.

3.2.1 Topic: European Institutions



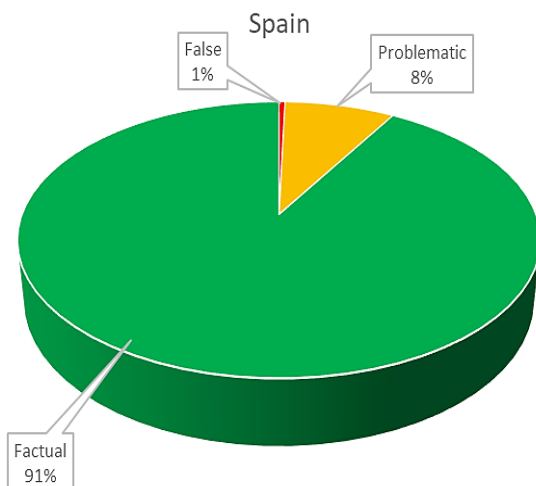
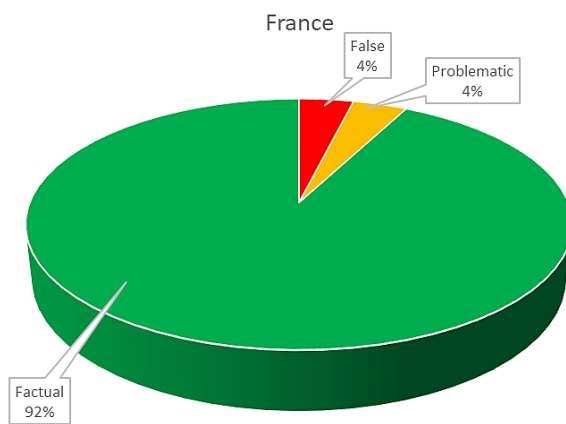
Figure 2 - European Institutions



European institutions, also due to elections that were held in March, have been widely discussed in the three countries.

Unlike in Italy, false and problematic news have not reached a critical mass in France and Spain.

However, in all the three countries there has been a concentration of false and problematic news, particularly during the period preceding the elections.



Source: BuzzSumo.

Figure 3 Composition for European Institutions

3.2.2 Topic: Migration

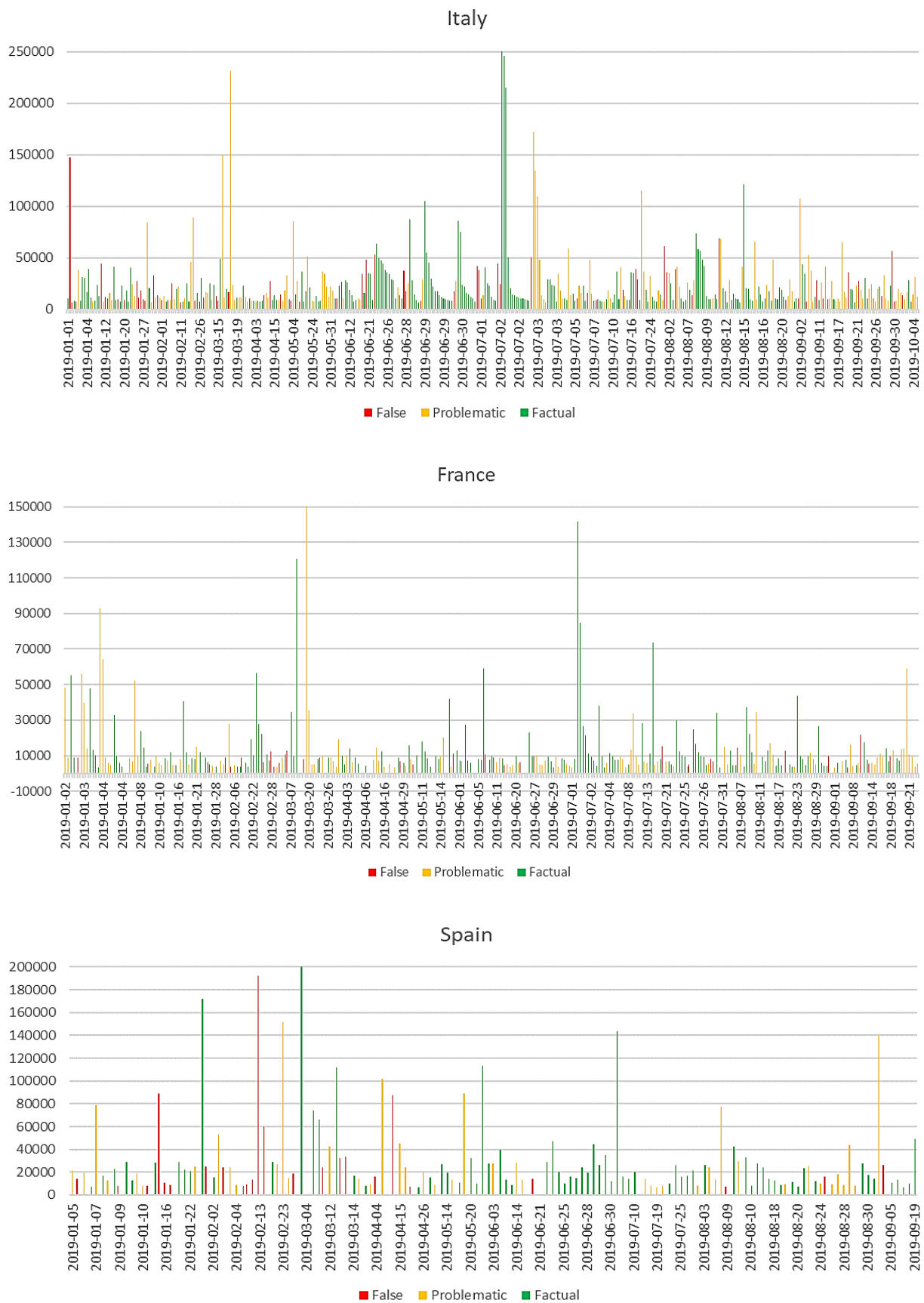
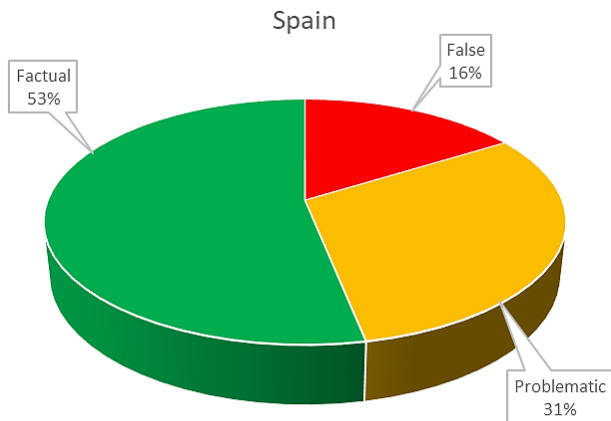
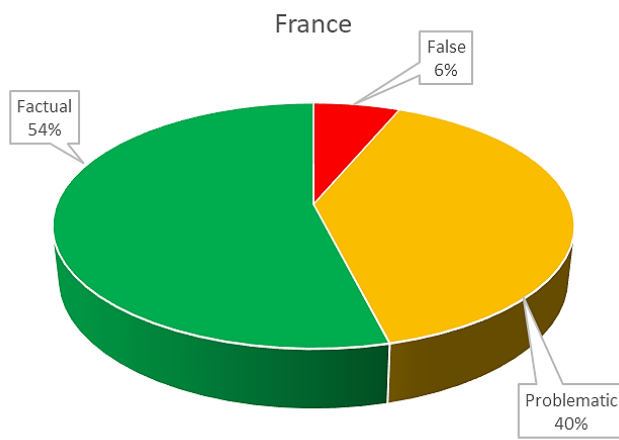
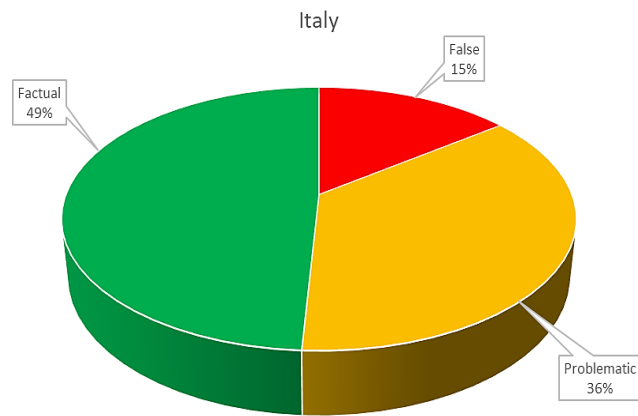


Figure 4 Timeline for Migration



The topic of migration appears to have been highly polarizing during the monitored period (January/October 2019) in all three countries.

Data collected shows a large spread of false and problematic information in particular before the European elections (April/May).

The “Sea-Watch incident” was also highly discussed. At the end of June, Capt. Carola Rackete was first denied to dock her ship carrying 53 rescued migrants in Italy, then decided to dock anyway, being arrested for a couple of days. Figure 4 shows a small spike in false and problematic information during that period.

Although most of the information was factual, a dramatically large number of problematic information was shared, reaching out to an even wider audience not enough prepared to cope with such massive amounts of misleading content. As a matter of fact, this type of content has proved to be challenging for fact-checkers and was often able to bypass online platforms filters and moderation.

Source: BuzzSumo

Figure 5 Proportion on Migration

3.2.3 Topic: Intolerance

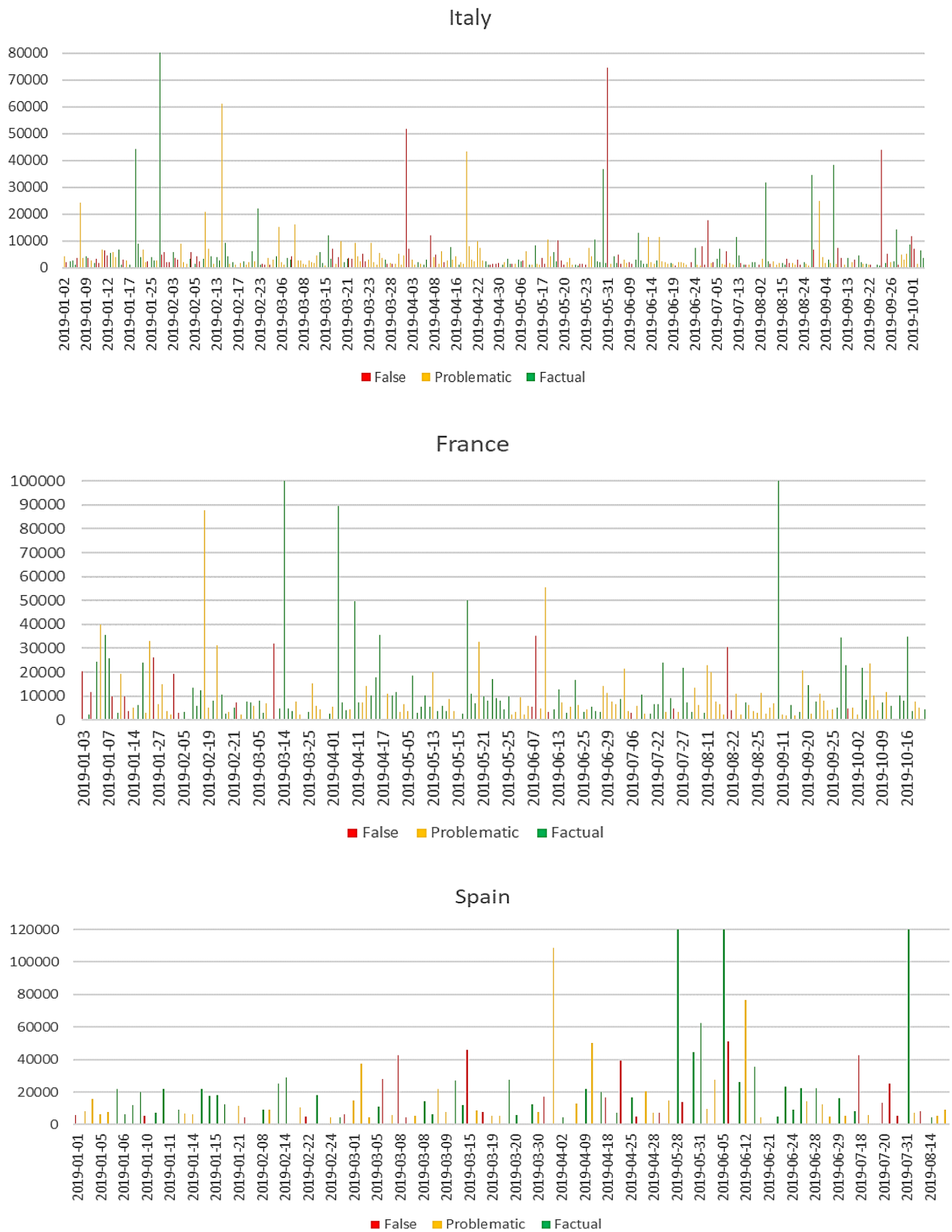
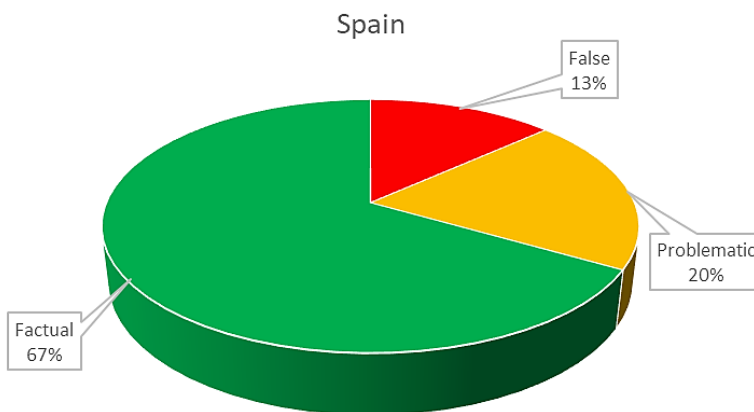
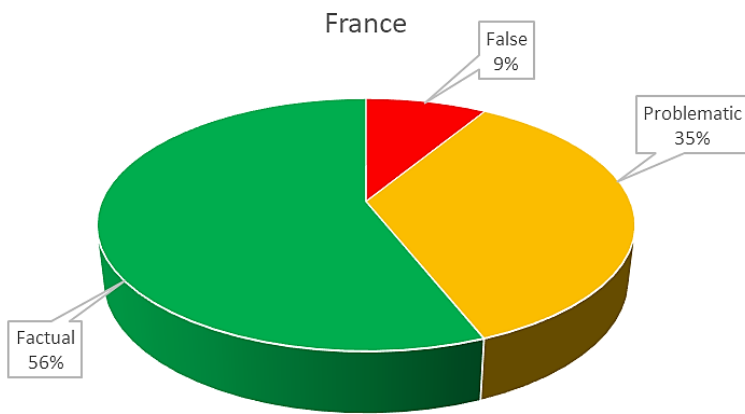
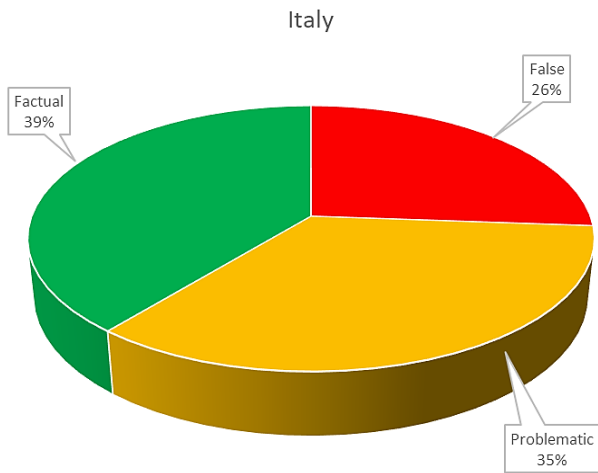


Figure 6 Timeline for Intolerance



In general, the topic of intolerance was highly polarizing and data shows considerable differences among the three monitored countries.

In Italy and France, hate speech was mainly directed against Muslims, while in Spain the main concern of extremist outlets was “feminism” and pro-women rights activists *threatening* traditional family values.

Billionaire George Soros and his activities were massively attacked by populists and far-right outlets in all the three countries, spreading lots of conspiracy theories, anti-Semitic, false and problematic stories.

Source: BuzzSumo

Figure 7 Composition for Intolerance

3.3 Foreign interference

The collapse of East Germany, the implosion of the Warsaw Pact and the dissolution of the USSR led to the feeling that liberal democracies won the ultimate war.⁵⁸ However, in the last 30 years, a new international disorder has allowed despots and dictators to reconquer space and power to the point of being able to imagine a possible *revenge* on democracies. This new geopolitical situation took the West by surprise, because the main actors are no longer only two but multiple, and the more dangerous weapons are no longer nuclear weapons but digital ones and high-risk clashes are not frontal but asymmetrical, hybrid.

The battleground is mostly Europe, but the front extends from the Far East to the Persian Gulf. Russia and China lead the assault, moving from different premises, but converging in the effort to make NATO and the EU implode, while separating as much as possible the United States from their traditional allies. It is an offensive that arises from the common belief that, by breaking the Euro-Atlantic link, the West as a strategic entity would end, allowing its major rivals to take its place. Russian military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014, the massive Chinese infrastructure project being built on Eurasia and the mosaic of sovereigntist and populist parties that re-propose anti-Americanism and anti-globalism, combined with sudden asymmetric cyberwarfare, can describe the most formidable and dangerous challenge that democracies are facing since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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.⁵⁹

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".⁶⁰

The countermeasures adopted in recent years against disinformation have forced malicious actors to change their strategy and to adopt a more cautious attitude. The latest Russian campaign posted on both sides of sensitive topics such as the environment and sexual equality but struggled to attract followers due to the operators' attempts to stop the accounts being caught and disabled. This seems to have undermined their ability to gain followers and spread divisive political messages.⁶¹ For this reason disinformation campaigns seem to rely less on false news and more and more on problematic contents, which are more difficult to identify by platforms and fact-checkers.

The figures in the following pages show how Russian state-controlled outlets tried to interact with European audiences on the three monitored topics. Their articles were mainly in support of false and problematic stories, with the clear aim of creating confusion and reinforce narrative structure and in-group beliefs. Data shows a relative larger activity in France than in the other monitored countries.

⁵⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Avon Books, New York, 1992.

⁵⁹ Clint Watts, *Russia's Active...*

⁶⁰ Alina Polyakova, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, Atlantic Council, Nov. 2016.

⁶¹ Jack Stubbs, *Russian operatives sacrifice followers to stay under cover on Facebook*, Reuters, 24 October 2019.

3.3.1 Sputnik/RT on European Institutions



Figure 8 Timeline for EU on Sputnik

3.3.2 Sputnik/RT on Immigration



Figure 9 Timeline on Migration for Sputnik

3.3.3 Sputnik/RT on Intolerance



Figure 10 Timeline for Intolerance and Sputnik

4 Disinformation in Action

Among the many false stories shared in 2019 in the three monitored countries, two examples were chosen to illustrate how the combined effect of false and problematic content works in a disinformation campaign, and how Russian controlled media attempted to enhance chaos and diminish trust in mainstream media and democratic institutions.

4.1 France: Integration of Muslim Brotherhood

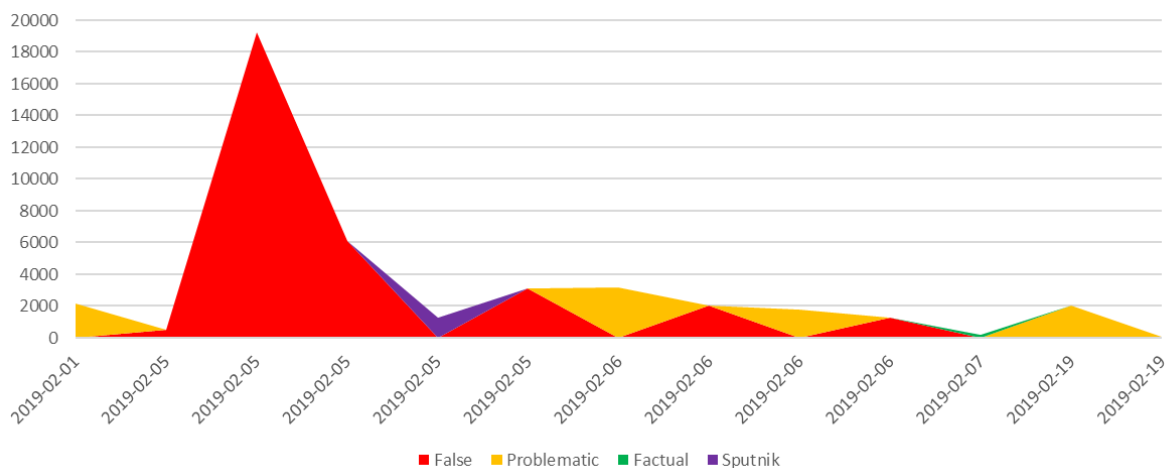


Figure 11 Timeline for Disinformation story about Muslim Brotherhood in France

IMMIGRATION ET ISLAMISATION FRANÇAISE, POLITIQUE FRANÇAISE, SOCIÉTÉ CIVILE FRANÇAISE

Cheval de Troie: quand une musulmane députée « En Marche! », à peine naturalisée, souhaite inclure les « frères musulmans »!

Une jeune députée « d'En Marche », se revendiquant musulmane, fraîchement naturalisée, milite pour intégrer les « frères musulmans » dans la vie politique!



INTERNATIONAL 19:56 05.02.2019 (mis à jour 20:01 05.02.2019) URL courte 29 1 21

S'abonner Google News

À l'antenne de la chaîne LCP, la députée LREM franco-tunisienne Sonia Krimi a donné un avis favorable à l'idée d'intégrer les Frères musulmans* au pouvoir en Égypte. De ce fait, elle s'est retrouvée sous le feu de la critique des internautes.

LES DÉCODEURS - VÉRIFICATION

Partage

Sonia Krimi et les Frères musulmans, histoire d'une citation dévoyée

Des sites et pages Facebook ont utilisé des propos de la députée La République en marche pour la dépeindre en soutien des islamistes, avec beaucoup de mauvaise foi.

Figure 11 shows the development of a false story about French Member of Parliament Sonia Krimi, who was falsely accused of having pledged for the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood in France.⁶² After a TV appearance of Ms Krimi, far-right outlets began sharing the false story, reaching a peak in shares at the beginning of February.

Sputnik article, even though not meant to fact-check the story, was indeed technically correct, anyway it contributed to spread the story for a couple of more days.

In recent years, Russian news outlets have taken a more cautious approach, giving support to controversial stories, not necessarily contributing themselves with false claims.

To date, there are no codified response mechanisms able to deal with such sophisticated communication chicanery.

Figure 12 Headlines on Muslim Brotherhood (From Top: a far-right outlet, Sputnik, Le Monde)

⁶² Adrien Sénécat, *Sonia Krimi et les Frères musulmans, histoire d'une citation dévoyée*, Le Monde, 7 February 2019.

4.2 Italy: UN Global Compact compulsory for EU states?

In March 2018, the European Commission was falsely accused to be plotting against its member states to make the UN Global Compact for Migration⁶³ compulsory.

The false news emerged for the first time on March 9th on M1, the main Hungarian state-owned TV station. On 11 March, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó issued a note stating: "The document acquired by Hungarian public television M1 indicates that the European Commission is working in secret to make the Global Compact binding for all states".⁶⁴

On 11 March, Commission spokesperson Mr Schinas answered the question of a Hungarian journalist stating that the fears were unfounded, that the document was an internal note from the Legal Service of the Commission, dated February 1st 2019, and did not create any obligation. Anyway, the false news spread rapidly in most part of Europe, pushed by far-right outlets.

Figure 14 shows how the disinformation campaign spread in Italy. To an initial information neutral situation, on March 21st, the false story was shared to a wider audience, pushed by far-right outlets. This first attempt failed and was immediately fact-checked. However, five days later the false news was shared again not only by far-right outlets, but also by mainstream conservative media, and repeated by some political leaders. This second attempt was more successful and crossed the digital boundaries, being mentioned on traditional media.

Sputnik shared the false news to its audience, contributing to its survival for a few more days. A second fact-checking was published on the 28th of March, but at that moment, the false story had already lost momentum and slowly disappeared.

⁶³ The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is an intergovernmental agreement, negotiated under the aegis of the UN, which aims to cover all aspects of international migration. The preamble of the document clearly states that it is not mandatory. When the UN General Assembly voted on the Global Compact on 19 December 2018, 19 EU states voted in favor while 9, including Italy, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Latvia, voted against.

⁶⁴ Péter Szijjártó, *The greatest lie told by Brussels to date has been revealed*, March 11, 2019 (<https://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-greatest-lie-told-by-brussels-to-date-has-been-revealed>).

ESCLUSIVO. Global Compact: ecco il documento segreto UE che lo rende obbligatorio

Nel testo si legge: "Si deve concludere che il GCM ha valore legale ed è capace di influenzare il contenuto della legislazione adottata dalla UE".

Global compact migration, la UE ci ha teso una trappola: invasione studiata a tavolino

EUROPA UE, in risalto giovedì, 28 marzo, 2019



Così la Ue c'imporrà il "Global Compact"

OPINIONI 15:45 28.03.2019 UBL abbreviato

8 0 22

Ecco come Bruxelles vuole costringere tutti i paesi membri ad accettare l'accordo globale voluto dall'Onu che equipara migranti irregolari e rifugiati introducendo l'obbligo all'accoglienza indiscriminata.

Global Compact obbligatorio? Come una bufala si è diffusa per l'Europa

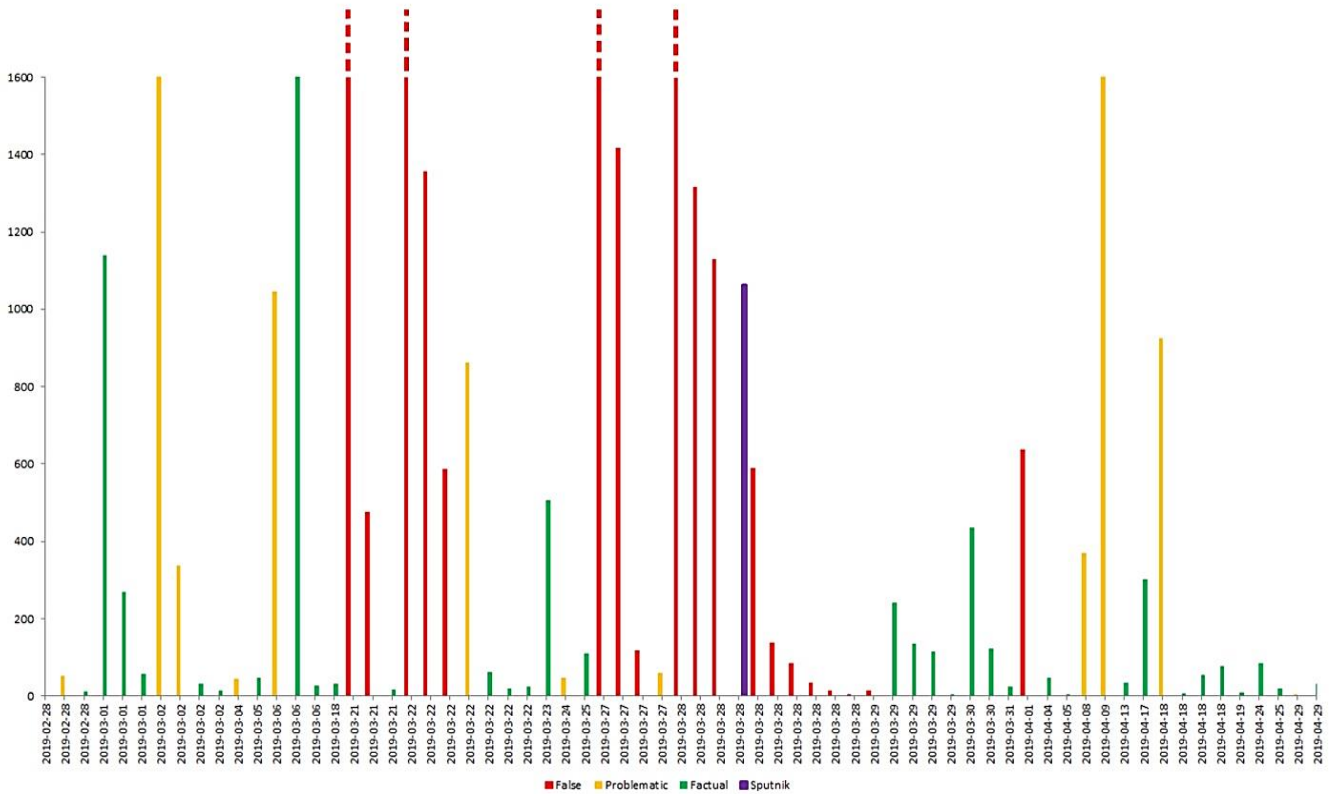
29/03/2019 - 15:32 AGI - Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (Esteri)

Numerose testate di estrema destra hanno parlato di un documento segreto europeo che imporrebbe agli Stati membri l'accordo sulle migrazioni. La realtà è un po' diversa

Figure 13 False story about Global Compact (from top: two far-right outlets, Sputnik, Fact-check.EU article from AGI)

Probably, this false story modified the perception of the UN Global Compact, and the European Commission activities on migration, for all the vulnerable and unprepared citizens who were exposed to it.

Figure 14 Timeline of the Disinformation Attack on Global Compact



Generic content	The false story is shared for the first time		First fact-checking	Five days later, the false story is reshared by far-right and conservative mainstream media.	Sputnik attempt to give the false story more visibility	The false story slowly fades away	Second fact-checking	Attempted rebuttal from far-right outlets against fact-checkers		Generic content			

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Disinformation campaigns exploit the powerful means provided by online platforms to reach a wider audience through sophisticated organized hostile narratives. Designed to erode trust in mainstream media and institutions, they are organized per theme and cross-platform shared in order to enhance virality. Topics are presented to reinforce community and culture pride, exploiting the tribalism within each targeted community. However, their messages largely differ from their end goal. Although the aim appears clear (against migrants, LGBTQI, ethnic minorities, etc.), nevertheless, the specific message does not matter, because the main purpose of these hostile narratives is to undermine the trust with democratic processes and to destabilize society.

Malicious actors know how to benefit politically from manufacturing fear and division. Fear mongering and fiery rhetoric is designed to heighten emotions and alter beliefs significantly increasing anxiety levels, distorting the perception of reality. Citizens' vulnerabilities are targeted with existential threats that cause people to cling more strongly to their cultural worldviews, increasing their support for those who share their national, ethnic, or political identity, and increasing their intolerance and aggression toward those who do not. Leading to tribal behaviour and biases that can cloud our rational judgment.

There are several misconceptions about disinformation that seems hard to eradicate. For example, recent studies showed that disinformation campaigns do not only target those less educated, instead, they purposely use rhetoric, criticism and undermining techniques to foster doubt and confusion. It is also wrong to consider disinformation only limited as false information. Like society, it does not operate in a binary system (true/false), but is composed by a complex mixture of true, problematic and false information. For example, disinformation could also be an accurate set of facts in a misleading context.

Algorithms, indiscriminate data collection, and micro-targeting are part of the problem. Even if an increasing number of scholars have been recently casting doubts over the effectivity of micro-targeting in reaching and persuading people,⁶⁵ there is no doubt that in a healthy information environment, people would still be free to express their opinion without being exposed to artificially amplified information designed to mislead, incite hatred, reinforce tribalism or erode trust in democratic institutions.

As recently stated by former Research in Motion's CEO, Jim Balsillie: "The current [online platforms] business model is the root cause of the problem. Data at the micro-personal level gives technology unprecedented power and that is why data is not the new oil — it's the new plutonium. It is amazingly powerful, dangerous when it spreads, difficult to clean up and has serious consequences when improperly used. A business model that makes manipulation profitable is a foundational threat to markets and democracy. Democracy and markets only work when people can make free choices aligned with their interests, yet companies that monetize personal data are incentivized by and profit from undermining personal autonomy".⁶⁶

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

⁶⁵ For more info: Eitan D. Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate*, Cambridge University Press, 2015; David W. Nickerson, Todd Rogers, *Political Campaigns and Big Data*, HKS Faculty Research Working Paper, November 2013; Angela Chen, Alessandra Potenza, *Cambridge Analytica's Facebook data abuse shouldn't get credit for Trump*, The Verge, Mar 20, 2018; Felix Simon, *The Big Data Panic*, Medium, 25 March 2018.

⁶⁶ Jim Balsillie, *Six Recommendations for the International Grand Committee on Disinformation and 'Fake News'*, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 7 November 2019.

Monitoring Hostile Narratives. Continuous monitoring of the information environment, including but not limited to false news, would help to meaningfully capture trends and better identify disinformation agents (homegrown or externally controlled). To this end, a more flexible definition of inaccurate information is needed, of course without trying to solve the philosophical quest to define the very nature of truth.

Improving algorithmic transparency. News feed personalisation has ultimately led to the creation of virtual echo-chambers and facilitated the targeting of vulnerable citizens by malicious users. It is indeed necessary to reduce the bias impact of algorithms by giving users the possibility to know why a specific content has been shown, and provide them with the possibility to modify or opt-out, taking into account that a complete de-personalisation of content would create some inconvenience to legitimate independent creators.

Reducing hostile content amplification. Disinformation creators rely on accounts (genuine and/or automated) to connect with their audience, exploiting platforms' algorithms. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that accounts caught spreading disinformation (voluntarily and/or involuntarily) could be sanctioned by establishing a demerit point system similar to the one in use by driver's licensing authorities, which issue cumulative demerits (or points) to drivers on conviction for road traffic offenses. Repeated violation should result in their accounts reaching less and less audience, before ultimately being shadow-banned, or banned. Clearly, the procedure must be consistent and transparent, including the possibility of appealing the sanctions brought against account holders.

From confrontation to cooperation. Online platforms are designed to reward polarizing content, thus creating an incentive to share increasingly outrageous posts in order to gain attention and visibility. In the long run, this approach has led to disrupting the very essence of online platforms, as a growing number of citizens are discouraged from participating in online discussions due to fear of being personally attacked and blamed. A solution to this problem could be redesigning the reward system around the principles of cooperation, offering more visibility to users that collaborate with others instead of promoting confrontational behaviour.

A different approach to raising public awareness and improving digital education across Europe. Unfortunately, current conversations about public awareness and media education tend to be shaped in a patronizing way (i.e. people need to be taught how to consume information intelligently). Instead, it would be more effective to encourage citizens to develop their own cognitive skills, and be able to understand autonomously when a negatively charged message is trying to manipulate their emotions and trigger their lower fears and prejudices. This different approach will allow us to protect personal vulnerabilities, reduce the effects of manipulation, and give citizens back control of their reality.

In conclusion, it is wrong to assume that disinformation is only the fault of “modern” technologies, like algorithms. Online social networks and platforms indeed amplify, sometimes distort, a polarization that already exists in society. A definitive solution to hostile narrative is complex and there is no silver bullet for this problem. A multi-sector approach is needed, from regulating data collection and micro-targeting, reduce amplification of misinformation content, to dealing with citizens radicalised by a prolonged exposure to hostile narratives. To reduce the impact of disinformation and misinformation on our society, a more complex and heuristic approach, which involves tech players, media, public institutions, and political actors, is essential.

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