

The Covid-19 Pandemic as a Challenge for Media and Communication Studies

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An ecological approach

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The infodemic, pandemic, and COVID-19

Fausto Colombo

Introduction

The purpose of this contribution is to focus on the notion of *infodemic*, as it was widely used by International and Supranational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The term (and the concept defined by it, which as we shall see has undergone transformations in the space of a few months) has been used both to define phenomena of information circulation and to identify solutions to the damage generated by incorrect and misleading information, in what we might call a media ecology perspective. The first question that this chapter asks is therefore: how functional are the concepts of infodemic and media ecology in times of pandemics, and what is the relationship between them?

For media and communication studies the analysis of the concept of infodemic and its evolution is interesting from two points of view. First, because it allows us to question its theoretical heuristic value. Second, because it allows us to grasp a signal of transformation of the current media ecosystem, characterised by the strong presence of social platforms. In particular, as we will see, the rapid transformations of the meaning of the term *infodemic* authorises the hypothesis that a new phase is opening in the relations between governmental institutions and digital media and platforms. This new phase has been prepared by the management of, and reaction to, some phenomena observed in recent years: Brexit, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, the Cambridge Analytica case. In these cases, the circulation of false and misleading information was judged as a crucial concause, and the dramatic news of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated new sensitivity to the issue of fake news and its impact on public health. A second question arises at this point: what is the communicative balance between public intervention, common good and democratic defence of freedom of expression?

My contribution is divided into three parts. The first and the third describe two different phases of the use of the term infodemic by three international and supranational institutions: the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and the European Union. These two parts will use

discourse analysis as a methodology to sketch a brief history of the idea of infodemic and its evolution. In the second part – that will use an “oriented” literature review of the platforms – I shall describe the mid-term evolutions that made possible the turning point between the first and second phase of the definition of infodemic, showing that this turning point was prepared both by some traumatic events and by a new model of relationship between international and supranational political institutions and social platforms, developed in the last years.

As I will try to clarify in the conclusions, the turning point in the definition of the notion of infodemic (which we will describe as a shift from an *infocentric* to an *ecological* conception) indicates on the one hand the confirmation of the central importance acquired by platforms in the field of communication and media, on the other hand the probable entry into a new season, yet to be defined, which opens new problems of fine-tuning the balance between public intervention (by institutions, traditional media and platforms) in the name of the common good and the democratic defence of freedom of expression.

The definition and the fight against infodemic by international institutions: first phase

The use of the term *infodemic* by international institutions is documented from the earliest stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Already on March 5, 2020 (at that point, the number of infected people in the world had not exceeded 100,000), the World Health Organization (2020b), in its Situation Report No. 45, focussed on the risk of an infodemic as additional damage to the epidemic development:

Infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. Infodemics can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people.

The report presents initiatives to reduce infodemic risk, starting with the observation that

During emergencies demand for information is high, there are often many unknowns and people will seek information from sources and individuals and entities they trust.

The proposal contained in the report is that of setting up *trust-chains*, that is, networks of subjects (institutions, associations, professionals) that can produce, exchange, and make available reliable information on the pandemic.

This use of the term infodemic comes from afar. The first occurrence (see for instance Merriam Webster definition: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning>) of the concept was in Rothkopf (2003). The author explicitly referred to the informational risks associated with an epidemic, and in particular to the SARS, which in his opinion was a clear example of the intersection of a relatively localised viral case and global news coverage (and consequences):

SARS is the story of not one epidemic but two, and the second epidemic, the one that has largely escaped the headlines, has implications that are far greater than the disease itself. That is because it is not the viral epidemic but rather an “information epidemic” that has transformed SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, from a bungled Chinese regional health crisis into a global economic and social debacle.

Rothkopf (2003)

Rothkopf’s definition of infodemic can be summarised in three steps and a proposal for action.

The steps are as follows: (1) a phenomenon of a certain gravity (health or other), but localised in one area of the planet, enters the global information sphere (2), becoming part of the global discussion via legacy media, internet, and word of mouth (3) to the point of causing global consequences. The proposal of intervention is to make available correct and reliable information to critical audiences.

The WHO document of March 5, 2020, quoted above, clearly shows its dependence on Rothkopf’s article. On the other hand, when the paper is published, there is still the belief or hope that the COVID-19 outbreak can be kept within a “local” dimension: the number of cases reported outside China is still relatively modest, and in this sense it can still be part of the type of events underlying the characteristics (events of limited magnitude, although with potential global influences), relevant with Rothkopf’s “model”.

From this perspective, the risk of infodemic is evoked as a potential for further harm, based on the mechanism of virality. The WHO paper refers to the attitude of people to seek information from individuals or institutions they trust, that is, to bypass traditional institutional channels.

Another important point is that the WHO document does not evoke direct health risks among the possible consequences of infodemic, but rather the danger that the circulation of unverified information will create confusion and distrust among people. This belief seems to be in line with Rothkopf’s model, which itself was not specifically dedicated to the consequences of an epidemic, but rather to localised events of any kind, provided they are capable of producing a high level of information circulation (another example cited by Rothkopf was the collapse of airlines and many tourist companies following terrorist events).

I would define the approach to infodemic based on Rothkopf's model as *infocentric*. Its focus is on the relevance of information and its circulation: infodemic is basically nothing more than the disproportionate production of unverified information on dimensionally limited events, such as to produce disproportionate consequences. This is why the solution proposed by WHO (creating trust-chains) is perfectly in line with Rothkopf's model, which he, in fact, supported in his article:

Yet if information is the disease, knowledge is also a cure. We should react to infodemics just as we do to diseases. Understand how these ideas are introduced into the population, how they spread, what accelerates their spread, what their consequences are, and what localized outbreaks may be contained. That does not mean repressing information. It means effectively managing each outbreak and presenting the facts fully and quickly to critical audiences.

Rothkopf (2003)

In short: if you control (without repressing) information, you are able to control the consequences of infodemic and infodemic itself. A conviction of this kind also appears in other documents of international institutions. For example, in a Joint Statement of Members of the European Council of March 26, 2020, it is written:

We will resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication on what we are doing and thus reinforce the resilience of our societies. The Commission and the High Representative will be fully involved and will report on our joint efforts to the Council.

Members of European Council (2020)

And in an April 2020 a UN document, in listing UN initiatives to counter the pandemic, stresses the centrality of trust-chains, in which platforms are also involved as vehicles for positive content:

United Nations country teams and missions on the ground are using all available channels, such as radio and social media to dispel rumours and counter misinformation...

Partnering with WhatsApp and Facebook, WHO launched dedicated messaging services in several languages, including Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, to share critical guidance on COVID-19.

United Nations, Department of Global Communication (2020)

This model of interpretation and intervention poses a number of theoretical issues that make it highly contestable. For instance, some researches have

empirically shown the limits of effectiveness of trust-chains (Aroldi, Carlo & Colombo, 2007); it is obvious – as we will see in a moment – that the advent of social platforms and the consequent multiplication of the actors at play in the information chain makes it increasingly difficult to control both information and sources. On the other hand, the emphasis on the relevance of institutionally ratified good information (“good money” which would drive out the infodemic “bad money”) seems to presuppose that citizens make their choices on the basis of pure rationality, being guided by the “best” information rather than the worst. On this point, which should be discussed at length, I will limit myself to recalling the “paradox of responsibility” evoked by Derrida (2002):

Saying that a responsible decision must be taken on the basis of knowledge seems to define the condition of possibility of responsibility (one cannot make a responsible decision without science or conscience, without knowing what one is doing, for what reasons, in view of what and under what conditions), at the same time that it defines the condition of impossibility of this same responsibility (if decision making is relegated to a knowledge that it is content to follow or to develop, then it is no more a responsible decision, it is the technical deployment of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem).

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Beyond these interpretive weaknesses, the use of the term infodemic has the merit of drawing attention to the role of communication during the pandemic, and the relevance of its quality.

However, the notion of infodemic rapidly changes meaning in the documents of WHO and other international and supranational organisations in a matter of months, or even weeks. The triggering factor of this rethinking, which will have very important consequences, is certainly the rapid escalation of the pandemic: very soon, unfortunately, it must be admitted that the COVID-19 epidemic is not SARS, nor any other type of localised and localisable event: its spread is planetary, and is configured as a real global emergency, capable of putting at the centre of the policies of all countries the “right to health”, even at the expense of other rights (such as the freedom of movement or social relations).

However, it is my belief that the rapid escalation of the pandemic has also acted as an accelerant for a phenomenon of a different nature: a radical change in the perception of the role of economic, social and institutional actors in the new global information ecosystem. This change was prepared by medium-term structural phenomena and short-term cultural phenomena, and rapidly led to a new conception of information policies that I would like to define as ecological, and that I will try to demonstrate in the third part of this work. Now, however, it is necessary to describe the medium- and short-term changes related to the media ecosystem.

The parabola of platforms

In the development of the net, the era of the platforms constitutes the most recent phase. The first phase (from the origins up to the Eighties of the twentieth century), was that of the technological and cultural premises. The second (the Nineties) was characterised by the development of the internet and the first great commercial explosion of the dot.coms (see Colombo, 2012; van Dijk, 2013; McCullough, 2018). The third (the actual one), which followed the crisis of 2000, is marked by several intersecting processes: technological convergence and the digitalisation of traditional media, with a welding between media and telecommunications; the birth of new portable devices with increasingly high performance (tablets and smartphones); and, above all, the birth of platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter, but also Airbnb or Uber) which, as van Dijk, Poell and de Waal (2018) write, are “programmable architectures designed to organise interactions between users” which allow users to upload their contents, combining, according to Meikle (2016), public and private communication.

The birth of platforms provoked a radical transformation of the media ecosystem, through a process that has involved all dimensions of society. From an economic point of view, Amazon, Alphabet, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft today fully occupy the number one spaces in terms of turnover among all the companies in the world (see Fuchs, 2015). Their expansion has increasingly limited or absorbed competition (including that of traditional media) with unprecedented strength on a global scale (see Colombo, 2020).

From an organisational point of view, platforms have proposed a radically new model, based on the non-necessity of assets. Neither Facebook nor Instagram nor YouTube nor TikTok need to produce content: they are produced by users, in most cases voluntarily and free of charge. The use of proprietary algorithms allows platforms to reprocess the data collected and produce strategies for the promotion and sale of user data both to improve their performativity (with increasingly curated and personalised services) and to transform them into economic value (by selling them to other commercial partners).

Some authors speak in this regard of “digital capitalism” (see McChesney, 2013), to indicate that the economic mechanism on which the platforms are based does not constitute a break with traditional capitalism. The novelty consists, if anything, in the fact that the new fundamental commodity of the system is constituted by the behaviours of the users, insofar as they can be transformed into data (see Zuboff, 2019).

In the first phase of their success, the economic and organisational logic of the platforms seemed unstoppable: in particular, their globality allowed them to escape many local taxes thanks to the choice of locating their legal headquarters in the most fiscally convenient countries; their organisational novelty allowed them to escape accusations of monopoly; the refusal of

content-related platforms to call themselves media companies preserved them to a large extent from both copyright regulations and legal responsibilities for hosted content.

However, in recent years, a certain turbulence has emerged in the relationship between political institutions and platforms, linked to very different factors (from the question of taxation to the question of respect for copyright, to name but two examples), which has however gradually led to the emergence of a new sensitivity towards the social dimension of their actions, particularly regarding platforms involved in various ways in the circulation of content.

A radical turning point was constituted by a swarm of events that occurred in 2016, the year in which a referendum approved the UK's exit from the EU ("Brexit") and the US elections were won by Donald Trump. In both cases, a very strong presence of fake news (circulated on social media) was detected, which according to many observers would have determined or favoured the results of the consultations. In particular, during the 2016 US presidential campaign, some fake news about the competitor Hillary Clinton was spread with impressive speed and breadth through social media (particularly Facebook). In 2018, it emerged that a consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica, had, in fact, used data on Facebook users with the aim of targeting the 2016 US presidential election. The discovery sparked a controversy that led Facebook to revise its ethical statements (Colombo, Murru & Tosoni, 2017). One of the consequences of these events was the debate on the topic of post-truth, which highlighted the consequences of disintermediation in the field of journalism (Maddalena & Gili, 2020). The basic thesis sustained by many authors, critical of social platforms, is that – independently of responsibility for content – the economic structure of platforms can favour the emergence of a specific form of production of falsehood (or rather of indifference to the quality of content), because algorithms favour the circulation of "extreme" content, in itself favoured by the ability to stimulate users' curiosity or their tendency to accept content close to their own beliefs, thus generating echo chambers, that is, information bubbles that are proof against doubt or counter-evidence.

The events that have been quickly summarised here have gradually weakened the idea of neutrality with respect to content that social platforms had cultivated since the beginning of their history, so much so as to lead to a progressive, albeit bland, agreement with public authorities regarding codes of self-discipline, such as the Code of Practice on Disinformation, signed with the European Commission, where Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, and Mozilla highlight practices to combat disinformation or discrimination (European Commission, 2018).

This new sensitivity does not seem to be taken into account by the first definitions of infodemic (the *infocentric* one) used by the WHO. However, in a short period of time, things were bound to change radically.

The definition and the fight against infodemic by international institutions: second phase

The increasing diffusion of the pandemic accentuates in national and international institutions the concern also for the circulation of false information, or for other possible damages created by a misleading use of the media. Already in a document dated May 19, the 73rd World Health Assembly writes among other things:

The [...] Assembly [...] calls on Member States, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic [...] to provide the population with reliable and comprehensive information on COVID-19 and the measures taken by authorities in response to the pandemic, and to take measures to counter misinformation and disinformation as well as malicious cyber activities.

World Health Organization (2020d, *my emphasis*)

But the specific concept of infodemic returns in a new WHO paper, published in September, in which the shift is clear from what I have called an *infocentric* approach to a more *ecological* one, more complex both in defining contextual conditions and in identifying strategies for action and reaction (World Health Organization, 2020a).

The paper in question underlines that the current pandemic is the first of the platform era, noting the deep ambiguity of information technologies:

At the same time, the technology we rely on to keep connected and informed is enabling and amplifying an infodemic that continues to undermine the global response and jeopardises measures to control the pandemic.

World Health Organization (2020a)

The document redefines and broadens the concept of infodemic: it is no longer a question of an overabundance of uncontrolled information, causing distortion and confusion. Instead it is a complex context, both online and offline, in which *deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals* can find space.

In addition, the health consequences can be considered not only indirect but also direct:

Misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunisation campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.

World Health Organization (2020a)

According to the document, in the new context managing the infodemic is a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, and hence new ways of combating the infodemic itself are identified.

In fact, it is no longer just a matter of *promoting the timely dissemination of accurate information, based on science and evidence, to all communities, and in particular high-risk groups* but also of *preventing the spread, and combating, mis- and disinformation while respecting freedom of expression*.

In the document there is a very clear step in the direction of a strategy that is not limited to promoting correct information activities, but must also counteract actions of misinformation and other related risks, in the awareness that this counteraction can have an impact on respect for fundamental freedoms. This element constitutes an essential novelty in the practices of contrasting infodemic, which is thus redefined in all respects as a health priority. A further element of novelty is constituted by the reference to the stakeholders of information, which are no longer limited only to institutions and traditional media, but include civil society and social platforms:

We further call on all other stakeholders - including the media and social media platforms through which mis- and disinformation are disseminated, researchers and technologists who can design and build effective strategies and tools to respond to the infodemic, civil society leaders and influencers - to collaborate with the UN system, with Member States and with each other, and to further strengthen their actions to disseminate accurate information and prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation.

World Health Organization (2020a)

I define this new approach of the international institutions as *ecological* in two senses: the first consists of the description of the media as a whole ecosystem; the second questions the ways the media play a role in making the society more sustainable.

The main difference between the *infocentric* approach we saw at work in the first institutional documents on the pandemic and the one I define as *ecological*, visible in the new documents we are now analysing, is that the former interprets the infodemic as the deviation of a process of information circulation that “naturally” should tend to a quantitative balance between the size of events and the size of news, as well as the substantial adequacy and verifiability of the latter. The correction of this imbalance consists – as we have seen – in the introduction of the “good currency” of correct information, issued by certified sources and broadcast by responsible and transmitted by responsible and deontologically reliable media to an audience that is mostly critical and discerning.

Vice versa, for the ecological approach, infodemic is a risk inherent to the state of the current ecosystem of media, of the subjects that participate in

it (including platforms, unaware users and even criminals) which can and must be controlled and corrected in situations of risk to the common good (like public health) through an intervention promoted by institutions and through the engagement of all intermediaries involved in the production and transmission of content (therefore not only media companies but also platforms and even users) to avoid damage to the ecosystem of information, and through it to a common good such as health. From such a perspective, the common good of collective health is worth the risk of a partial reduction of an indiscriminate freedom of expression that is in any case guaranteed, obviously within democratic limits.

Such a turnaround is conceivable only within a process such as the one I described in the second part of this paper in which, in particular, the role of social platforms and search engines progressively ceases to be that of simple dis-intermediators with respect to the traditional information chain and new mediators of user content, and comes closer to that of traditional media companies.

As I mentioned, this call to responsibility has been progressively embraced by platforms. The pandemic emergency has sharpened accountability, as evidenced by the EU's periodic reports. In December 2020, for example, the European Commission acknowledges platforms for their efforts to limit misinformation about COVID-19,

promoting authoritative information sources through various tools; working to limit the appearance or reduce the prominence of content containing false or misleading information; increasing efforts to limit manipulative behaviour on their services; enhancing collaborations with fact-checkers and researchers, and increasing the visibility of content that is fact-checked; providing grants and free ad space to governmental and international organisations to promote campaigns and information on the pandemic; funding media literacy actions and actions to sustain good journalism; and setting up actions to limit the flow of advertising linked to COVID-19 disinformation.

European Commission (2020)

In citing examples of platform interventions, the paper specifically notes some significant interventions in the dissemination of accredited information:

In October, Tik Tok tagged 81.385 videos across its four major European markets (Germany, France, Italy and Spain) attaching a sticker with the message 'Learn the facts about Covid-19' and directing users to trusted, verifiable information sources.

and the removal of false or deceptive content and closure of untrusted accounts.

In October, Google blocked or removed over 2.3 million coronavirus-related ads - including Shopping ads - from EU-based advertisers and buyers for policy violations.

Even the interpretive activity of the user, which in the infocentric approach was basically assumed to be an almost automatic recognition of authentic information issued by a credible and authoritative source, is now described as an interpretive activity that must be responsible and can be guided. In World Health Organization (2020c), some patterns are presented, dedicated to the ways that a reader (or viewer) can adopt to defuse the circulation of false information.

In the paper, a new, explicit definition of infodemic is proposed, closely related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a name for the possible discipline that must study and counteract it is provided:

All of this is called the infodemic: a flood of information on the COVID-19 pandemic. Infodemiology is the study of that information and how to manage it.

World Health Organization (2020c)

The new *ecological* strategy proposed by the international and supranational institutions essentially implies overcoming the infocentric one: on one hand, an alliance and co-responsibility of all the subjects responsible for the circulation of information (from the institutions themselves to the traditional media, from the platforms to their users and the traditional audiences of information); on the other hand, the balance between actions to promote correct information and actions to censor incorrect information. On the whole, subtly, the notion of infodemic shifts from a predominantly quantitative conception with qualitative effects (whereby the disproportionate amount of information also produces bad information) to a directly qualitative conception, where it is assumed that the common circulation of good and bad information is an inevitable fact, and that it is necessary to act with complex solutions of both promotion and repression.

Conclusions (with recommendations): the consequences of the ecological turn after the pandemic

Let us summarise the path taken so far. In the introduction to this chapter I posed two questions. The first was how functional the concepts of infodemic and media ecology are in times of pandemic and what is the relationship between them.

We have seen how – at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (when in March the pandemic seemed to still be relatively confined to China) – international and supranational organisations, and first of all the WHO, signalled the risk of infodemic. The term was used in the sense coined by

Rothkopf in a 2003 article, and indicated the risk that an event – not only an epidemic – of local scope, through the massive dissemination of uncontrolled and misleading information, would trigger global (bad) consequences. This risk had to be avoided through the highlighting of correct information, delivered through the media by authoritative sources. We called this kind of perspective *infocentric*.

In two months, however, the approach of international and supranational institutions on the risks of misinformation had been updated and complexified, to the point that even the definition of *infodemic* had changed, being specifically related to the current pandemic. The new approach takes into account the media ecosystem that has been developing in the first 20 years of the 2000s, and which sees at the centre of the circulation of information the role of social platforms and search engines. The turning point in the definition of *infodemic* does not derive only from the pandemic event itself, but is the precipitate of a new approach to the theme of the public role of information and the social responsibility of platforms, which has matured in recent years starting from a series of striking cases (the role of disinformation in the Brexit cases and in the 2016 US elections; the Cambridge Analytica scandal).

This approach, which we have called *ecological*, claims the right of institutions and the responsibility of platforms to intervene on information and its mechanisms (including through forms of control and censorship) when disinformation or violence challenge the pillars of democratic coexistence or public health.

In short, we can say that the main feature of the media ecology approach adopted by institutions and platforms has changed the concept of *infodemic*, making it a key instrument of intervention in the field of combating fake news and misinformation.

The second question I had asked was: what is the communicative balance between public intervention, common good and democratic defence of freedom of expression?

According to what we showed, the approach applied by the *de facto* alliance between international (UN, WHO) and supranational institutions (such as the EU) with platforms for limiting the circulation of false information about the pandemic, constitutes the beginning of a new phase of governance in the media ecosystem.

In conjunction with the turnaround we reported, the beginning of 2021 gave another signal in this direction: the censorship by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter of incumbent (but not re-elected) US President Donald Trump regarding the presidential election, on charges of spreading false information and inciting hatred and violence (particularly against Congress).

This concomitance demonstrates the sharpness and also the problematic nature of the new approach to *infodemic* and disinformation, especially within the Western democratic model, and the so-called European approach to network governance, appears in all evidence.

The most relevant consequences, which will have to be evaluated in the near future, seem to me two.

First, the era of total platform autonomy ends. In the traditional division between the three political approaches of the net (the frankly commercial one, guaranteeing the freedom of enterprise, dominant in the United States; the one of accentuated social control, which has as the main example the People's Republic of China; the one based on the emphasis on the rights of the citizen, prevalent in the European Union and in the UK: see Bradford, 2020; Naim, 2020). The one that appears to be winner is certainly the one prevalent in the European Union and in the UK, with the admission by the big social giants that – in some specific cases – their independence and irresponsibility with respect to the contents posted by other subjects cannot be invoked, and indeed must be somehow corrected in the name of the common good.

Second, the issue of the “judgment of truth” expressed in censorship obviously makes it necessary to carefully rethink the role of institutions in defining the boundaries between “disinformation” (as a malicious and harmful act towards the common good) and “free expression of opinions”, in order to avoid that censorship operated in the name of health or defence of citizenship rights turns to repressive models. It has been noted, for example, that the misuse of the term “denialism” (Wu Ming, 2020) with regard to a series of behaviours (from the denial of the existence of the pandemic to the protest for some decisions aimed at containing it or for their economic consequences) risks determining discriminatory behaviours even with regard to democratically lawful actions.

In short: an analysis of the concept of infodemic and its public uses can illuminate not only the understanding of an important political and cultural turning point but also the problems and issues arising in the near future.

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