

THE HOAX HUNTER

"Fact checking and debunking aren't effective because this information is only used by people who are already predisposed. Each player in the system is looking for what's most to their liking on social media and then filters this information to the community they belong to, while ignoring everything that refutes the thesis they've already formulated"

Telos: What is fake news?

Walter Quattrocioni: Fake news is a word coined to refer to a process whereby false or inaccurate information is spread through web channels (social media in particular).

It would be more accurate to talk about 'misinformation' rather than 'fake news', but by now it's already become a household word. To understand this process well, first we need to provide some background information.

Since 2013 the World Economic Forum has included massive digital misinformation among the global risks. My group began studying this phenomenon at that exact same time and the results of our research are clear, unequivocal, I'd say.

Our research method is based on a firm quantitative approach. In fact, we conducted a series of analyses on millions of Facebook users.

On the Internet, we find an environment with an endless amount of information and we tend to select the information that best fits with our worldview (confirmation bias) and we tend to surround ourselves with like-minded people who think in the same way we do, the so-called echo chamber (a neologism introduced also by the Italian dictionary **Treccani** last year).

It doesn't matter if the information is true or false, what's important is that it's in line with our worldview.

It's an environment where there's little intermediation, where like searches for like, and thereby corroborate each other, intertwined with a series of elements typical of our historical era, such as globalisation, creating a deadly mix.

You've always said there's no point in fact-checking. Could you explain why?

Fact checking and debunking aren't effective because this information is only used by people who are already predisposed. Each player in the system is looking for what's most to their liking on social media and then filters this information to the community they belong to, while ignoring everything that refutes the thesis they've already established.

The science evolves on its own based on temporary, complicated truths that it isn't always capable of explaining entirely. Answers proliferate to every question and each person chooses the answers they want, actually segregating into clans that share the same narratives.

Want an example? The one that blames fake news for reviving populism and antagonising the elite.

So there's no need to do anything about it. But perhaps we can prevent it. How?

In a recent study, we tried to figure out how polarisation is a driver for fake news.

As I said before, on social media people tend to acquire the information that reinforces and gives credit to their own worldview and ignore all the information in contrast with this. This phenomenon increases segregation into groups of people around shared narratives.

So, we started with this hypothesis: is it possible for extremely polarising issues to be topics for fake news? In this case, can we predict what topics are potentially more susceptible to becoming polarising ones?

We did this and the results were very encouraging.

This new set of algorithms we've created allows us to filter and create alerts regarding discussions that could generate viral cascades around false and misleading news.

It's a model to analyse people's behaviour on social media that then allows the topics that have a higher likelihood of becoming the subject of fake news to be spotted in advance.

In 2016 we officially entered the post-truth era: an entrance that was codified by the Oxford Dictionary when it added the term 'post-truth' to its word list as word of the year. Does this neologism refer to something with even deeper roots?

Human beings have always been irrational. The brain has always processed information using approximation and bias. Rediscovering this in 2016 tells us a lot about a few things that have been postulated.

Post-truth might just be the manifestation of human beings' absolute, deep need to emancipate themselves from dependence on others, on intermediaries.

Now that all human knowledge is just a click away, we want to exercise our right to freely choose.

It's an attempt to emancipate ourselves from ourselves that, if we don't accept human beings' limits, inevitably leads to the creation of new myths and new gods. The Internet, for better or worse, is undeniably the maximum expression of democracy.

Praised for the Arab Spring and lambasted for Trump and Brexit.

It's almost a way of denying a change that has by now already taken place and that we cannot turn back from. True reformists

would do better to adapt and harness it, because we live in a world and a society that changes at the speed of light. The elite that should be taking action, perhaps out of fear, has taken shelter behind extremist and outdated standpoints. Standpoints that are so narrow that at certain point they became totally unrealistic. That has always been the process. Technological progress and the inability to cope with it, globalisation and government power that can only be exercised at the national level. Uncertainty and complexity and the inability to describe it. The pursuit of personal, partial, ideas no matter what.

Failure to conform is fatal. Perhaps we need to begin re-building bridges starting with just a pinch of humility.

One last question. Fake news was called into question, first by the [New York Times](#), as having possibly interfered with the recent political elections. Has your monitoring group at Ca' Foscari managed to find anything out or is this fake news as well?

We're working on a specific report about this and I can't give you any information. Let's just say that the phenomenon was rather blown out of proportion.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

Post-truth. The conviction that it's no longer the facts, nor the attempt to represent reality, that count. The only thing that counts is the story that's most to our liking.

A surrogate of facts that many people believe are true because they match our well-established preconceptions, that good old penchant for hearing what we want to hear because in our eyes it's plausible.

What's more, nowadays it seems to go without saying that we only consider credible the information that confirms our idea about the world.

Is this all the Internet's fault? No, argues Walter Quattrociocchi, it's something with much deeper roots.

The web certainly provides fertile terrain: here fake news is skilfully mixed with the facts so that it's made to look believable, an excellent way to grease the wheels of circulation and reach the people who, deep down, or not even that deep down, already *suspected that's how things are*.

Quattrociocchi, a computer scientist, researcher first at IMT School for Advanced Studies in Lucca and now at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice, as well as an expert in cognitive science, has been navigating the stormy seas of post-truth for years.

The news flash he gives us, or rather *gives us again*, in his interview with PRIMOPIANOSCALA, is that confirmation bias is far more powerful than fact checking.

And he goes on to say that debunking often backfires. What?

When faced with the denial of what we believe to be true, our paranoid thinking becomes even more structured. And we almost always come to the conclusion that whoever it is that has tried to deny our convictions has manipulated the information to do it. A vicious cycle where people with contrasting standpoints keep on accusing each other of *hurling lies*, seemingly impervious to the other's objections.

Well, despite the socio-IT lingo and the foreign words, Quattrociocchi's analysis is crystal-clear. But can we defend ourselves?

The Guardian suggests trying out the online game **Bad News**, created by Cambridge researchers and by a Dutch media collective to 'help understand how false news is created' and 'the tactics used to spread online propaganda, for political or financial purposes.' Because, the researchers reiterate, the notion that needs to sink in for all of us is that 'fake news is like a drug, and it needs to be fought with courses and prevention to help us develop mental antibodies.'

However, sometimes fake news is just a hoax, and we should just have a good laugh about it. One fitting example regards some news about an INPS (Italian social security agency) form to request the 5-Star Movement's proposed citizenship income.

At first, the form looked real, but after actually reading it through, and not even very carefully, you noticed several satirical parts of it that uncovered the hoax. It's enough to read the name of the form itself: Form NTGF/01, which stands for '*nun tengo genio e fatica*' (literally, *I don't fancy working*).

Joke or no joke, this hoax fuelled divisions, hate and conspiracy theories.

Want a little resolution for the summer holiday? Follow the advice of **Nicholas Carr**, who has addressed web-induced stupidity, 'each of us should spend more time concentrating, adopting mental habits that foster calm and reflection.'

With this August issue, published a bit earlier than usual, at the beginning rather than the end of the month, Telos wishes you a good summer vacation. Just a touch less connected than usual.

Mariella Palazzolo



Walter Quattrociocchi is currently the head of the **Laboratory of Data Science and Complexity at the University of Venezia**. He was Coordinator of the CSSLab at IMT - School for Advanced Studies of Lucca. His research interests include data science, cognitive science, and dynamic processes on complex networks. Recently, Walter's research has focused on dynamical processes on complex networks, graph algorithms with a special attention on computational social science. His results on misinformation spreading served to inform the Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum (2016 and 2017) and have been intensively covered by the media (The Economist, The Guardian, Washington Posts, New Scientist, Bloomberg, Salon, Poynter, New York Times). In 2017 Quattrociocchi coordinated the round table on experts about fake news for the at the time President of the Italian Chamber of

Deputies, Laura Boldrini. For the complete list of his papers click [here](#)

He is author of **Blog Italia** and is to be found on Twitter [@Walter4C](#), and on Facebook, **Walter Quattrociocchi**.

Walter was born in Rome and he is 38 years old.

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