

DISINFORMATION SOUNDS LIKE A THERAPEUTIC STORY – AND THAT’S WHY IT’S WORKING

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Abstract

This past year has shown that the sanitary risks of SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic are equally matched, if not exceeded on long run, by infodemia effects. Disinformation, fake-news are widely considered an existential threat to open, democratic societies, straining the limits of institutions to cope with socio-political tensions. As such, acknowledging the significance of this phenomenon, this paper address the phenomenon of disinformation, challenging the prevalent current paradigm based on cognitive, linguistic approach, by offering a new perspective grounded on the role of fictional stories for individual and collective sense making. We advance a new interpretation upon the mechanisms behind disinformation consumption using the role of an immature ego structure, thus explaining the demanding side of disinformation. The utility of this new interpretation ranges from the reconsideration of mental irrationality in sense-making, or proposal of new tools for recognizing those predispose to consume disinformation, to a more comprehensive approach to strategic communication.

Keywords: security; disinformation; ego structure; story; meaning.

INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has shown once again the importance of proper communication for a robust response in cases of national security emergencies and consequently the risks associated with the disinformation phenomenon.

Due to the technological and socio-political transformations that have taken place rapidly for the past twenty years, an adequate approach when defining risks and threats to national security must be addresses through a systemic approach to society, the so-called whole-society-approach, which necessarily includes the informational space (National Defense Strategy 2020-2024, 26). As the informational domain has a tripartite definition (abstract, technological, cognitive), the way people process information has become essential for an adequate strategy in fighting disinformation. How people think, how they generate meaning or separate truth from falsity have become hot topics of dispute for experts in strategic communication.

During the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the informational domain marked by hyper-interconnectedness has been one of the systems that have illustrated the massive effect induced by simple fluctuations in the economy, sanitary or educational systems. At individual level, (new) mass-media news has contributed to the subjective perception of an unstable and unpredictable environment, threatening the ontological security. For Anthony Giddens (Giddens, Anthony 1991, 35), ontological security is a subjective need to represent oneself as a whole person, with stable and continuous features through the time, that can exert his agency in a stable cognitive environment. It is therefore vital for an adequate strategy on information security to understand how individuals perceive the reality, represent themselves in society and make decisions in this new informational space, whether in their personal lives, or as high level decision-makers in private or governmental organisations. Consequently, continuing a line of inquiry suggested by Vosughi in the seminal paper *The spread of true and false news online* (Vosughi, Deb, and Sinan 2018, 127), we will explore the

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mechanisms that leverage fake-news genesis and diffusion, to understand the “why’s” behind disinformation. As such, the key problem this paper wants to examine is how people using the information received from media make sense of their life, how they delineate between information and disinformation, between “true” and “false”.

We use a psychodynamic approach to the human mind, searching for deeper and more complex explanation than simple stimulus-reaction behaviourist schemata. The aim is to understand and explain disinformation phenomena, and not to judge or label individuals or social categories.

DISINFORMATION – A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

On 21 May 2020, Melissa Fleming, who leads global communications for the United Nations as UN Under-Secretary General for Global Communication, stated: "When COVID-19 emerged, it was clear from the outset this was not just a public health emergency, but a communications crisis as well". Such statements, although generous, indicate a rather narrow perspective on social mechanisms, locating the source of issues mainly at the level of communication. Consequently, the solutions for extra compliance with sanitary measures apparently might be achieved through more communication. This example illustrates the hubris of those practitioners and theoreticians that have come to believe that communication is a universal remedy, of those who really believe the J.L. Austin credo of doing things with words (Austin, John 1975), and believe that gaining public legitimacy undergoes the same treatment as selling cars. Seduced by explanations that give primacy to communications, we tend to forget that behind every utterance is a thought animated by emotions, and furthermore that language is a tool used both to express and to adapt. As Michael Tomasello has indicated, “language is the capstone of uniquely human cognition and thinking, not its foundation” (Tomasello, Michael 2018, 127). Furthermore, as experience has proved, communication, no matter how Abstractits actors may be, is done not only with words and images, but with actions too. When actions actually meet the needs, the effect of this form of communication is more powerful simply because it considers the receivers’ identity, addressing not just what they think or feel, but the whole personality as a living being in a specific socio-ideological context, with a specific set of values and ethics.

The information environment where communication takes place has a tripartite dimensionality, technological, informational and cognitive. Although technological development seems to grasp all attention and make the foundation for almost all the explanations behind information disorder, in this paper, we will focus on the cognitive, mental dimension of the informational space and the psychosociological mechanisms behind fake news. Before briefly presenting the current understanding of disinformation, it is useful to describe information and information space.

As we are told, we live in the information society, or knowledge-based society, a place where, apparently, “knowing” has become just as vital as breathing. In this new info-saturated environment, the stakeholders are both ordinary citizens, and media trusts, social-media platforms, state institutions. Seduced by the glamour of the current information technology, communication analysts tend to forget that in this space, technology is just a tool, and the mental dimension remains the most relevant feature in the information domain. After all, it is not the reach, speed, or information’s volume that drives confrontation in the informational space, but fear, distrust, and a heightened suspicion about intentions of the Others.

Information has a large variety of definitions and interpretations, but for the purpose of this paper, we use the phrase of semantic information (Floridi, Luciano 2010, 33), which is considered a way to codify the experience using symbols for sense making and truth seeking. Furthermore, information has a pragmatic, adaptive function, being intimately connected with decision-making. When translated from physics to psychology, information’s entropy reduction function might be associated with uncertainty decreasing, and knowledge acquiring. However, semantic information, unlike in the mathematical theory of communication, is human dependent, an active contribution being needed in order to create meaning, a subjective link between the knower and the respective object of knowledge. The nature of this link is often overlooked, but with Peirce’s theory on the sign, we learn that between the sign and the object stands the *interpretant*, which “in all cases includes feelings”

(Peirce, Charles 1998, 409). Furthermore, recent neuroscience discoveries have even showed that the fundamental form of consciousness is affect (Mark Solms 2021). From these observations, it is evident that, at the psychological level, information, emotions and sense making are intimately interconnected and should always be analysed together. Furthermore, as we will see, through the concept of identity, the individual Self gains meaning as a member of a stable, inclusive community, which fundamentally is a community of shared meaning.

Disinformation is defined as a form of information, information that is altered, false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation, or country (C. Wardle and H. Derakhshan 2017, 20). The effect produced is that of confusing the audience, of inducing alternative realities, so that the phenomenon of disinformation has been defined as a threat to security. Disinformation might be executed from outside, with Russia and China being the most mentioned foreign state-actors, but to ignore the contribution of inner voices, either the useful idiots, or the populist politicians, with political goals, would be an error. It is then noteworthy to acknowledge that the so-called foreign driven influences are foreign only in terms of geographical location of source, but the content manipulated is mastered to tap with surgical precision on the most pressing questions, fears and anxieties of the internal targeted audience. This feature indicates another major characteristic of disinformation, that is tailored and disseminated towards specific, beforehand well-known segments of audience, defined by particular psychological traits that enable precise, anticipated effects. Furthermore, the success of those who propagate disinformation seems to reside in listening much more comprehensively, on a deeper level of individual mind. Voicing concerns, fears, anxieties, but also the hopes, disinformation makes sense for specific audiences.

Using criteria as truth, false, or harm, the definition of disinformation is challenging and difficult, especially when there is intent to translate the phenomena in juridical norms. What is harm? How to delineate the agency, a real intention to induce harm? What is truth? These questions raise challenges for those who intend to punish the actors who disinform, but also raise heated debates on how to make clear the boundary between freedom of speech and disinformation, furthermore questioning the possibility for censorship. The matters of truth, agency, and harm lead us inexorably to audience, and mental reasoning.

Information is not just a flow that runs through networks of cables and processors, it is the “blood” that makes possible the emergence of various significations that stand behind social structures. And just like in critical discourse analysis’ methodology, information circulated should be acknowledged as simplicity carrying tacit presupposition about actors’ intentions, power, and identity. Therefore, information should always be analysed not just locally, using concepts of truth or falseness, but holistically taking in consideration the context, human motivations, interests, or the tools used in linguistic technology. Before scrutinising human judgment in order to understand what drives the spread of true or false information, thus clarifying the demanding side of disinformation, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of truth and its social determinism.

Among those who fight disinformation, it is widely accepted that telling the truth, grounded in empirical data and evidence, will ultimately undermine the power of lies. Behind this statement, there are at least two assumptions. First, that truth has some magical universal persuasive property. Unfortunately, evoking Daniel Kahneman, we know that “when faced with a truth which contradicts a bias we hold, we, as a species, are likely to ditch the truth” (Suiter, Jane 2016, 27). Secondly, that there is only one truth about facts and events, such treatment of truth being defined as the correspondence theory (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2018). As such, using the proper signs and language, the bearer of the truth will succeed to reflect adequately and accurately a fact, using symbolic language. This form of truth definition is mostly available for the scientific endeavour, although even in science there are different paradigms, schools of thought, and academic institutions. Moreover, scientific knowledge, which supposedly carries the truth, “cannot be thought of as angelically independent of the management policies these institutions develop in order to keep themselves in business.” (Valsiner and Rosa 2007, 25)

Theory and practice as well, however, show us that there are many other² definitions of truth, distant from logic, that furthermore underlie the social function of truth and the social constructivism behind truth crafting. Either for layers, or politicians (so called „spin-doctors“), the practice of spin it's largely tacit accepted as a must for professional success, furthermore underlying the weak relevance of facts, and the role of semantics in persuasion or even manipulation. As such, especially with post-modernism, truth has been associated with language and belief, replacing argumentation and logic, with rhetorics, reducing the truth to a *convention*. The door to relativism and multiple equivalent perspectives is thus widely opened, the truth becoming nothing more than an indicator of personal, subjective adherence to a statement. Especially in politics, there is an evident “shift to post-truth, trading, heavily on assumptions about an “era of truth” we apparently once enjoyed” (Corner 2017, 1100).

Using this short examination of information and truth, we can advance a new definition of harm induced by disinformation, which can be associated with the impossibility of building a shared meaning, a fundamental pre-condition for what Tomasello called shared intentionality (Tomasello, Michael 2018, 15).

WHO ARE THOSE WHO NEED A STORY?

Misinformation and disinformation are transmitted more quickly than information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). The answer to this apparently strange situation might be given by understanding the demanding side of the disinformation process, the reason why people like to consume fake (news). Hence, we depart from the current explanations on disinformation, which are mainly rational, logocentric, or technology-centred, and advance a hypothesis that explains the attractiveness of disinformation as it consolidates the neurotic mechanisms and immature ego structures of the targeted audience.

The so-called conspiracy theorists or negationist rejects the official narrative on the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, having as main argument that the virus has been artificially created and manipulated. Correlated, in the informational space, there were extensively disseminated messages on themes as: “pandemic was created to control people and make them obedient”, “virus was created as an experiment to kill as many as possible (genocide)”, “pandemic is a tool for dictatorship establishment”, or “the virus is the result of corrupted elites” (with Bill Gates as the main exponent). One doesn't need to be a chartered psychologist to acknowledge that the implicit, common thread of all these stories is the imagined conflictual relation between an oppressed, powerless victim (ordinary citizens) and a mighty persecutor (elites). Consequently, the labelling of those who don't accept the official narrative on SARS-CoV-2 pandemic range from “delusional people”, “irrational”, to “stupid”. Both the nature of the “negationist's” explanations on the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and the labels used for them compel us to shift the attention towards some non-rational, pre-logical or para-cognitive defence mechanisms used by audience to makes sense of this situation, of the way certain people react to the official sanitary measures, their anti-vaccine attitude, or involved in fake news consumption.

The human mind is operating simultaneously under two different “logics”, one that obey the principles of formal Aristotle logic and the reality principle, and another one, marked by paraconsistent logic or affective logic, pleasure principle, even indifference to reality. The former is sensible to facts and scientific truths, while the latter disregards even the duality truth-falseness³. This non-logical, affective realm has received various interpretations, all labelled as irrational, like imaginary, beliefs system, defensive mechanisms, affective logic, hypothetical thinking, wishful thinking, or unconscious bias. Moreover, reasoning when affected by irrationality was considered biased. Although biased is currently so much associated with (thinking) errors, it is often, if not always, the single way available for individuals to make sense and to adapt to reality. Additionally, without these so-called irrational influences, creativity, hypothetic or counterfactual thinking would not be possible. Every single

² In one of these thesis (redundancy theory), Gottlob Frege or Frank P. Ramsey simply shows that the predicate “is true” doesn't express anything larger or beyond the statement to which it is attributed.

³ For the unconscious, there is no negation, it is the mental space that tolerates the coexistence of opposites.

individual possesses a mind that operates under this dyad, the ratio between these two “logics” being variable, determined by context, age, education, biography, ego features, emotional disposition etc. As such, people use non-rational, illogical elements to make sense of their experiences.

We consider that an analysis centred on the correlation between the ego level of functioning and tendency to interpret messages using the so-called irrational mind is the most suited and relevant for understanding disinformation phenomena. Through the lenses offered by this tool (Bellak 2008), we can easily and meaningfully understand and explain the rejectionist attitude or the quasi-unanimous attitude of victimisation in front of an imagined persecutor, as an infantile, regressive level of ego functioning still present in many adults. A more mature, adaptive ego has two features, relevant for our topic, a higher disposition for testing and accepting reality (omnipotence diminished) and defensive mechanisms more adapted to social change. The positive consequences range from accepting personal limits of power and control, to a gradual shift from denial to intellectualisation or altruism, as higher, more adaptive forms of defence mechanisms.

The infantile, regressive level of ego functioning is also characterised by other feature that helps us to better understand the negationist attitude, that is a shallow level of super-ego⁴ integration, which further explains authority rejection and the feeling of being persecuted.

In the following paragraphs, we will indicate the correlation between disinformation consumption and infantile ego structure, using the concepts of narrative and story. As we will specify, the infantile has nothing to do with the degradation of the intellectual or cognitive function in pathological, psychiatric terms, but with the immature defensive mechanisms harnessed for self-esteem preservation.

We are told that “we need to equip people with the tools to see fact from fiction” (Pomeroy, Court 2020) but little is said about the massive power of various forms of fictions in human sense making. As Yuval Harari reminds us, humans are storytelling animals (Harari 2018). People need stories, and throughout all ages, individuals as part of a community have always needed a story. Stories are essential for humans to get a sense of continuity, facilitating interpersonal connection. From a psychological perspective, stories are the expression of the imaginary workings and the unconscious mind. Through their ambiguity, stories invite the listener to fill the gaps with personal attributes (ambitions, fears, hopes etc), making them unconsciously participatory. They can be recognised throughout the history in myths, legends, religions, or more recently as ideologies. They explain and make a meaningful link between past and present, between individuals and society, between the self-narrative and culture defined as a synthesis of collective stories. Stories seem to offer a resolution to our most basic conflicts and an illusory fulfilment of desires. Stories have made it possible for a shared meaning inside large communities to exist, and therefore the possibility for cooperation and coordination. They are simple and provide an imaginary way to escape the conundrums of the real world and the limitations of the Self. Along with these functions of stories, maybe the most significant one, as we learn from the seven plots series (Booker, 2004), is that no matter what the challenges might be, there is hope. Modern era and post-modernity, however, have brought the power of big, unifying “grand narratives” (Lyotard 1979) to an end. Religion or even modern ideologies lost their unifying function, their place being taken mainly by the frivolous, consumerist stories. The possibility for a communal, even imaginary reference has been thwarted by the fragmentation of society into a myriad of continually changing self-identities and an ongoing struggle for minorities rights. As such, adherence to disinformation might be interpreted as a form of identity recovery that promises to restore a more stable, meaningful and secure identity.

On the other hand, scientific thinking is considered the cure for disinformation. However, scientific discourse, through its characteristics, stands on the opposite side of the stories. Science is the language of modernity, with the rational, granular, mechanical view of the world. It keeps the reader in very close contact with reality, forcing him to continuously adjust to the facts and new changes. It is complex, precise, Abstract and highly rational, addressing the pure-logic-side of the

⁴ The superego is the third structure of the mind in Freud's structural theory, developed through identification, which leads to the internalisation of parents' values, and furthermore to internalization of society's norms.

mental reasoning. Science is organised as a database, from which affects were evacuated, and that is why its persuasive power is weak for masses, compared with stories, it simply doesn't inspire ordinary people to connect with each other.

Excepting the small minority of academia, the science discourse is non-participatory, while the story, through its plots and ambiguity, invites all subjects to project their own wishes, hopes and grievances, and thus becomes an excellent occasion for individuals sense-making process. While in science, people believe in facts, through stories people believe in belonging. Scientists might be linked (at the best) into knowledge based groups, while ordinary people that believe in a story feel included as members of the tribe. As such, tribes and stories acquire a containing⁵ function. What marketing guru Seth Godin teaches us seems to be ignored by many disinformation theoreticians. That, the world today is composed of various tribes (Godin 2008, 11), and meaning-making should not be isolated from the social context, so meaning should be intimately linked with self-identity, and not merely with rational information processing. Second, that using only the cognitive, rational frames for meaning-making is flawed for the adequate understanding of how audience's adhesion is generated, how people begin to believe in some particular stories.

In this context, people longing for stories is evident. It is stories and tribes that generate a meaningful identity, not facts or science. As we previously indicated, disinformation themes present in the media during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, but also those used by the Putin regime against the western world (Storytelling the disinformation, 2021) are all crafted as stories. When extended to large communities or entire nations through the ruling regime's controlled media, stories become propaganda, and reveal a paranoid, detached from reality society. Projected in the public space, this way of perceiving the world through disinformation stories gets legitimised as it seemingly shared by so many similar, normalising a point of view that paralyses any social responsibility.

Disinformation, fake-news are credible, consumed and disseminated because they provide a public story with illusionary, self-confirmation healing properties. If the reading of science fiction literature might be the expression of a healthy ego, which can temporarily regress in fantasia and then return into the real, the systematic ingestion of disinformation stories (or superstitions, mystery tales, conspiracy theories) illustrates ego's immature mechanisms, a fragile ego unable to change and to cope accordingly with the demands of life. Likewise, adherence to alternative views on reality (such as the so-called conspiracy theories or pseudoscience) might be linked with the perception of feeling excluded, marginalised. The correlated phenomenon of rejecting official science might be as well associated with individual's discomfort with one of the society's modernist ideology, namely that only what can be measured, quantified, matters.

CONCLUSIONS

No matter how spectacular and free from the physical world it might look, information gains relevancy through the interpretative function of human agents. Information pathologies that characterise the contemporary information space are fundamentally an evolving syndrome in the co-creation of meaning.

Sense making cannot be restricted to the informational domain, it must be connected with identity formation. Any analysis that focuses exclusively on the truthfulness quality of information is reductionist and local. Ignoring larger psychological, and socio-ideological contexts that generate meaning to individual's life and shape perception, judgment and decisions, is just another way of missing a genuine understanding of the disinformation phenomenon. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on the cognitive, rational level of interpreting information, as logic gives some undisputable form of authority, is misleading.

As the current association between disinformation impact and the emotional character of messages is shallow, we propose the use of the ego functioning level as an indicator for susceptibility to disinformation, interpreted as a meaning-restoring story. It better explains both the adherence to disinformation messages content and the rejection of authority. As such, an immature ego

⁵ In this context, containing is a function of the environment that provides safety and meaning.

characterised by excessive projection, omnipotence, denial of reality, low level of super-ego integration is more prone to disinformation. Disinformation prevents such forms of ego from contact with internal reality, protecting it from the most pressing internal conflicts, prolonging the existence of a fake, immature ego. Disinformation is designed as a story because, apparently, it offers a solution to an internal conflict, *pretending* that has solved it and furthermore maintaining the status-quo. As such, adherence to disinformation as stories might be perceived as a form of psychological resistance in the face of cognitive insecurity generated by the volatility of the contemporary society.

Disinformation stories become pseudo-therapeutic because they open an illusory intersubjective space where personal stories get intermingled with larger, collective stories, thus having a sense-making function.

In order to identify the factors that drive disinformation consumption and fake news spread, we suggest the use of various existing instruments designed to evaluate ego structure and functioning.

In conclusion, the response to disinformation becomes strategic when it is target-centric, and analyses the audience thoroughly and holistically, in their continually evolving socio-cultural context. State institutions and communication strategists might then realise that, in this ongoing battle for loyalties, citizen's hearts and minds will be conquered mostly by timely deeds and facts based on values and ethics, not just mere words and images. Instead of fantasising at strategic communication as the magic, silver bullet, its role as an essential tool in promoting national security interests would thus be clearer.

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