Regulating Online Disinformation:
Reacting to digital problems or building a better Internet?

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A B S T R A C T

In the current debate on disinformation, fact-checkers are similar to first-line responders. Their experience is a useful point of view that can inform further research and policy choices. Building on many years of fact-checking work in the Italian projects Pagella Politica and Facta. News, some observations will be introduced. First, a fundamental division between different kinds of fact-checking needs will be clarified. Secondly, some practical "laws" in the everyday approach to disinformation will be presented and discussed, ranging from the limited influence of a large number of disinformation narratives to the key role of superspreaders and the small observable role of foreign actors.

1. Introduction

Fact-checking organisations: A global surge

In the past few years, the rise of fact-checking organisations has been among the most relevant trends in journalism associated with the so-called "information disorder," the complex phenomenon of the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the media and social environment (Wardle, C., Derakhshan, H., 2017). Projects devoted to fact-checking have appeared all over the world, from Africa to Europe and from the United States to Latin America. Many global news outlets and wire services now include a fact-checking section, such as the *Washington Post* in the US, Reuters in the US, and AFP in France. As of today, according to the data collected by Duke Reporters' Lab, there

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[1] https://doi.org/10.55367/OZHI7640

are around 350 fact-checking organisations from more than one hundred different countries, even if the growth has slowed its pace in the past few months (Stencel, M., Luther, J., 2021).

This activity has caught the attention of many institutional players at the national and international levels. Fact-checkers have often been involved in coordinated efforts to tackle the issue of disinformation. This is especially true in Europe, where an ambitious project called European Digital Media Observatory (or EDMO) was launched in June 2020 with support from the European Commission.[2] EDMO has a wide variety of tasks, from training activities to coordination of academic research and monitoring of online platforms' activities against disinformation.[3]

EDMO also has a specific focus on fact-checking. It is working toward building a network of European fact-checking organisations and giving them the opportunity to work together on a digital platform, accessible only to fact-checkers, in order to facilitate the exchange of information and the quick response to emerging new narratives. So far, the network has caught the interest of 16 different fact-checking projects, covering almost all of Europe and involving important media players at the national level, such as Deutsche Presse-Agentur from Germany, AFP – with its many regional offices in Europe – and many others.[4] In terms of outputs, the network has started a series of monthly *Fact-checking briefs*, the first of which was published in July 2021.[5] The aim of these briefs, which summarise the results of a questionnaire circulated every month among the members of the network, is to monitor the main narratives of disinformation in Europe, collect the most relevant disinformation cases in the individual European countries and check which ones are common to more than one of them. In short, it aims to report on the disinformation circulating in Europe and to monitor cross-border narratives.

To give an idea of the results and of the content of these briefs, the main numbers from the most recent one, published in August 2021, are as follows: in July, ten organisations part of EDMO's fact-checking network published a total of 1,332 fact-checking articles, and roughly one-third of them, i.e., over 400, concerned Covid-19-related disinformation. Some individual stories had travelled across the continent and were detected in a dozen different countries, such as the false story that a court in Lisbon had supposedly announced that the "actual" number of COVID deaths in Portugal was 152 and not 17,000, the real figure.[6]

These efforts are at their initial stages, and more work will be needed in the next months and years before having in place a fully functional, common workspace for European fact-checkers. However, this project appears very relevant to building a common perspective and a common voice for fact-checkers in Europe. This is consistent with the efforts sustained by the European Commission in the past few years, following the work of the High-Level Group on Online Disinformation at the beginning of 2018 (European Commission 2018).

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[2] Full disclosure: the author is a member of the Executive Board of the project.
[3] For more information, see the official website: https://edmo.eu/edmo-at-a-glance/.
[4] See https://edmo.eu/members-of-fact-checking-community/.
[5] Available at https://edmo.eu/fact-checking-briefs/.
[6] See EDMO Fact-checking Network, 2021. Disinformation in July twisted reality to attack Covid-19 vaccines and containment measures (Monthly Brief no. 2).

At the international level, the main organisation concerned with connecting fact-checkers is the IFCN (International Fact-checking Network), set up by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies of Saint Petersburg, Florida. The IFCN manages channels of communications among fact-checkers like a community mailing list and a Slack channel and organises the annual Global Fact conference, the most important gathering for practitioners in the fact-checking field. Crucially, the IFCN is the keeper of the *Code of principles*, a set of commitments that fact-checking organisations decide to adhere to, ranging from nonpartisanship and fairness to transparency of funding and organisation. Compliance is assessed by independent evaluators.[7]

As of September 2021, there are 92 verified signatories from all over the world. The Code is especially important because being a signatory is the main requirement for participating in Facebook's Third-Party Fact-checking Program (3PFC), an important source of funding for the fact-checking community. The 3PFC also acts as another informal network of fact-checking projects, with periodic meetings and specific channels of communication.

2. Different kinds of fact-checking

And yet, moving to a more granular level, the fact-checking world is so diverse both in its external manifestations and in its own self-perception that few definitions can reasonably encompass the entirety of it, aside from the colloquial saying *You know when you see it*. Some fact-checking projects use verdicts and ratings, and some don't; some focus only on specific fields, like climate science or medicine or celebrity gossip; some are NGOs, and others are part of established media organisations. All kinds of media outlets have fact-checking operations, from TV stations to newswire agencies to newspapers, while many others do not perceive themselves as journalists at all. The annual International Fact-checking Network's *State of Fact-Checking* report gives a very good overview of this diversity (International Fact-Checking Network, 2020).

A stronger differentiation between various kinds of fact-checking is fundamentally necessary to provide a sound and comprehensive theoretical framework of the fact-checking field, but also to clarify to the public and to policymakers that "fact-checking" is a single term describing very different practices. A clear portrayal of these differences emerges from an analysis of the main disinformation items spread in Italy in the first weeks of the Covid-19 epidemic, an important viewpoint because the issue quickly monopolised the attention of all mainstream media, and soon all the disinformation narratives too.

During the initial phase of the epidemic in Italy, disinformation around the topic didn't focus on a single narrative. In fact, the topics were extremely different from the start.[8] The first debunking piece about disinformation related to Covid-19 published by the Italian fact-checking project Pagella Politica appeared on January 22, 2020.[9] The fact-checked article was published by an obscure news website that falsely reported precautionary measures in a major Italian international airport (the

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[7] See https://www.ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/.
[8] All the following examples come from the Debunking section of Pagella Politica's website. In April 2020, a new debunking project was launched by Pagella Politica, named Facta. News, and since then, the vast majority of fact-checks regarding the pandemic and without political undertones have been published on the new website.
[9] Pagella Politica, 22 January 2020. Notizia falsa: ALLARME VIRUS: si sta diffondendo anche in Italia.

website later corrected the article). At the time, just nine deaths were recorded in China, while no cases at all were known in Italy.

Between the end of February and the first weeks of March 2020, as the coronavirus outbreak grew increasingly serious in Italy, disinformation around Covid-19 rose in intensity and frequency compared to all the other topics until it became virtually the only topic around February 24, the day after the first small areas of Lombardy, the hardest-hit region in Northern Italy during the "first wave," were declared "red zones" (restrictions would eventually be expanded to the entire country on March 8, 2020). During these first few weeks, disinformation around Covid-19 ranged from the geographical area where the virus was spread to celebrities getting the virus (e.g., Pope Francis) or other famous names being particularly generous in sustaining the sanitary efforts (e.g., the soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, then at the Turin-based Juventus FC). Other stories regarded the origin of the virus and/or conspiracy theories around what happened in China – for example, the "assassination" of the famous Chinese doctor Li Wenliang. Rumours around false remedies and cures were also present (e.g., "drinking water every 15 minutes will prevent contagion").

From a strictly quantitative point of view, these were the most relevant false stories spread on social media. What happened in Italy in terms of the variety of disinformation surrounding the pandemic is very likely akin to the experiences of other countries. Similar types of disinformation were illustrated in research carried out by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford on 225 English-language fact-checks on coronavirus-related disinformation between January and the end of March 2020 (Brennen, J.S. et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, political discourse grew increasingly heated as the epidemic worsened. As with disinformation, the new coronavirus became largely the only topic discussed by national politicians around the end of February. Eurosceptic politicians from the opposition, for example, were quick to criticise the slow and indecisive support given to Italy by European institutions, and around mid-March, with the economic impact of the pandemic growing more evident, a heated discussion rose around the Italian government's response to the emergency, comparing national measures with the magnitude of German public financial support to the economy.

There were, of course, exaggerations, distortions, and the occasional outright lie, all across the political spectrum. But very few of the outlandish claims detected on social media or messaging apps had any exposure in political debates. There were some exceptions, like the apparent endorsement by the right-wing party The League's official Twitter account of the discredited theories put forward by the Nobel Prize winner Luc Montagnier around the characteristics of the new coronavirus.[10] However, Italian politics has largely been discussing separate issues compared to the focus of disinformation during the same weeks.

If the typical political claim sounds like «540 billion from the [European instruments] BEI, SURE and ESM are already available for healthcare and economy»,[11] or «The Emilia-Romagna region has the highest number of deaths related to Covid-19» in nursing homes,[12] both partially misleading and

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[10] Lega – Salvini Premier Twitter account, 17 April 2020 and Matteo Salvini Twitter account, 25 March 2020. Together with US President Donald Trump, his Brazilian counterpart Jair Bolsonaro and a few others, Matteo Salvini was included on April 16, 2020, in a BBC video on politicians pushing false claims around the pandemic.

[11] Statement by David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament, April 24, 2020. Interview with La Repubblica.

[12] Statement by Matteo Salvini, leader of the League, April 24, 2020. Twitter.

both from April 24, 2020, some disinformation stories detected in Italy in the same period involved a former Minister of Economy stating that «Italian retirees die too late» (he never did),[13] a photo of a mass grave in New York used in a false story about Milan,[14] and even a scam about Nespresso, the coffee-making subsidiary of Nestlé, giving away coffee-making machines for free because of the pandemic.[15]

This separation reflects a deeper problem in the denomination that will be discussed later, but it also underlines a fundamental difference inside the fact-checking world. That is the difference between political fact-checking, i.e., the evaluation of the veracity of politicians' and public figures' claims, as opposed to debunking or verification, i.e., the countering of viral hoaxes and disinformation mainly spread on social media and/or without a clear author. While these two processes share, broadly speaking, a common goal and a common willingness to engage with such a difficult concept as "the truth," they are otherwise radically different in their fields of inquiry, aims, tools, and audiences.

Political fact-checking aims at accountability and correctness in the political sphere and in public debate, to be reached through a process that centres around the analysis or discovery of data and experts' opinions. This is also the process at the core of scientific fact-checking. Ideally, its final aim is a correction, either implicit – by the politician not repeating the incorrect claim – or explicit – with the author of the claim retracting or publicly correcting it. In terms of audience, articles that fact-check complex economic issues can realistically aspire to reach the small subset of the general audience interested in politics and willing to engage with complex topics. It is essentially a bottom-top operation, where the "top" – political representatives, pundits, even journalists – is challenged by the "bottom" – the fact-checking organisation, acting as a representative of the general public (a possible alternative label for this practice could be "vertical fact-checking").

On the other hand, debunking viral hoaxes aims at a more truthful information environment in a broader sense. Its tools are often more technical because debunking largely involves the analysis of anonymous videos, images, and claims gone viral in social networks or messaging apps. This kind of fact-checking deals with information that has no clear origin, being originally spread in the so-called "anonymous web" (4Chan, Discord, closed groups on social networks, Telegram channels, and the like). The final aim is the removal of incorrect content and not a correction of the public record by a specific actor. The audience is more or less coincident with the general public, but it is often more relevant to the more vulnerable and fewer media- and tech-savvy. It is essentially a horizontal operation, one in which the fact-checkers aim to correct information already present in the general population and without an identifiable source outside and above it ("horizontal fact-checking" is a possible alternative label for debunking).

However young the fact-checking phenomenon is in journalism, the separation between two different types of fact-checking also has historical roots. Broadly speaking, the international fact-checking renaissance of the past decade has its roots in political fact-checking (Graves, L., 2016), with pioneering projects like Spinsanity (founded in 2001) and FactCheck.org (2003), and important milestones such as Politifact winning a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2009. But crucially,

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[13] Facta, April 24 2020. Pier Carlo Padoan non ha detto che «i pensionati italiani muoiono troppo tardi».
[14] Facta, April 24, 2020. La «fossa comune» per i «morti misteriosi» a Milano non esiste e la foto è stata scattata a New York.
[15] Facta, 28 April 2020. No, Nespresso non sta «regalando una macchina da caffè gratis».

in the past few years, a shift towards debunking is taking place after "fake news" became a household name in 2016. The same organisations that were almost exclusively dealing with political fact-checking increased the share of articles debunking viral hoaxes, memes, and the like: thus expanding themselves toward topics and material that, until now, was covered by very different projects like Snopes, established in 1994.[16] One could, in fact, be tempted to conclude that the meaning of "fact-checking" has radically shifted in the last five years or so, from mainly political to mainly debunking kinds of projects.

To summarise these first remarks, we present here the first "law of disinformation":

(1) Fact-checking means very different things.

It is now time to move toward how disinformation spreads.

3. The need for a new framework

Going back to the above-mentioned list of hoaxes, the vast majority of them were published on obscure websites or spread by only a few dozen social media accounts. Unbeknownst to the general public, any debunker can tell that there is an almost constant production of false stories and grossly manipulated images, but they tend to stay limited to small audiences. Debunking websites may publish many articles a day, and many of them do, but even a cursory glance at their homepages will reveal that many debunked stories do not reach the trending topics list and remain under the surface, by and large harmless and unknown. Such phenomenon can be summarised with the following "second law of disinformation":

(2) The vast majority of disinformation has little or no reach.

So why is it common wisdom that "fake news" and "disinformation" are one of the major problems of our era and a scary threat to our democracies? The second "law" sounds counterintuitive, if not plainly wrong. False stories are indeed widespread, and most importantly, they are more visible thanks to the visibility given by social media. It must be noted that we have little or no hope to conduct a quantitative historical analysis of the number of false stories in circulation today, compared to the diffusion of rumours or propaganda in the past, because that disinformation *ante litteram* was largely spread by word-of-mouth, and therefore undetectable for researchers of the future if not by faint traces. For sure such phenomena also happened in the past, but today we have the impression that they pose a crucial threat to our social fabric. And today their diffusion has certain peculiar characteristics, the first one being that very few of them are really successful. What decides their destiny is the power of influence of the people that share them.

Major political figures, for example, can have a role in the spread of disinformation when they pick up an otherwise little-known false story and decide to share it with their audiences. In other words, they can act as "superspreaders" of disinformation initially produced elsewhere. Recent research has

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[16] The impact of Facebook's Third-Party Fact-Checking program – launched in 2017 and of which Pagella Politica is a member – that focuses mainly on debunking and famously excludes political fact-checking, has been probably one of the major forces at play in this pivot.

pointed out that the activity of superspreaders can lead to the best – or, depending on your perspective, worst – results in terms of diffusion (Brennen, J.S. et al. 2020). Superspreaders can be politicians, TV presenters, even established scientists or just big social media accounts with large followings. They are the focus of the "third law of disinformation":

(3) In order to reach large audiences, disinformation needs superspreaders.

So far, the first "laws" deal only with false stories. They are quite easy to identify and check: after all, they consist of pieces of content completely made up in order to push a specific narrative. However, these are by no means the only kind of disinformation material out there or, better said, they are not the only kind of content currently associated with the broad cultural phenomenon variously defined as "disinformation," "information disorder," "information crisis" and the like.

One of the most popular classifications in this field, a common and often implicit starting point for the research on the issue, is the one put forward by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan in a famous report commissioned by the Council of Europe, published in 2017 under the title *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking* (Wardle C., Derakhshan H., 2019). The 2017 report presented the so-called MDM framework, one centred around the concepts of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

Leaving aside misinformation and malinformation, because they are of less relevance here, "disinformation" is divided into seven different categories, set along a line that goes from "least harmful" to "most harmful." Following this order, the MDM framework lists:

- satire or parody
- false connection
- misleading content
- false context
- imposter content
- manipulated content
- fabricated content.

From the point of view of a debunker, these seven categories work pretty well. "Fabricated content" and "manipulated content" alone cover a good size of the disinformation that they deal with. But outside this particular point of view, and most importantly from the point of view of the general public, these categories sound somewhat narrow or distant from the common person's idea of what the problem of "disinformation" is, however well-informed and even cultivated that common citizen can be. The current discussion around vaccines, for example, very rarely centres around totally made-up stories, but rather around the interpretation of complex statistics, suspicions of a cover-up by specific countries and institutions, or the evolving science about an illness unknown to the world only a few months ago. Even if the confusion and anxiety connected with the conflicting accounts of scientific evidence or the heated discussion around vaccines fuels the global debate on "disinformation," the existing framework for understanding and even classifying it fails badly in representing the real content of the debate itself.

Recent research points out the different meanings given to terms such as "disinformation" not only by common people but even by researchers (Santos-D'Amorim K., Miranda M., 2021). To quote a

comprehensive 2018 review of literature, «Despite all the attention to disinformation, fake news, etc., we are still lacking common definitions for many of these terms» (Tucker J.A., Guess A., et al. 2018). In a less diplomatic tone, a recent essay by Joseph Bernstein published by *Harper's* summarises all the doubts and failures in the attempts to define what "disinformation" is: «Misinformation" and "disinformation" are used casually and interchangeably to refer to an enormous range of content, ranging from well-worn scams to viral news aggregation; from foreign-intelligence operations to trolling; from opposition research to harassment. In their crudest use, the terms are simply jargon for "things I disagree with." Attempts to define "disinformation" broadly enough as to rinse it of political perspective or ideology leave us in territory so abstract as to be absurd» (Bernstein J. 2021).

In fact, the debate around disinformation very often touches whole fields of public discussion where the MDM framework rarely applies, or not at all. In the political realm, for example, it is clear from the experience of a political fact-checker that some of the most successful politicians with very large online followings seldom or never share completely false stories (i.e., "fabricated content" in the MDM framework) or manipulated ones or parody: their success depends on their ability to push a compelling narrative sustained by few successful catchphrases, without necessarily uttering a single false fact. Their rhetoric can be entirely true or, most of the time, non-verifiable. They can use a lot of predictions, which cannot be verified, or opinions that do not fit inside a simple "true vs false" framework. They can be extremely vague and yet convincing. To give just one disquieting example, it is impossible to properly *fact-check* the statement that Europe is experiencing an "*invasion* of migrants," but the expression has great power nonetheless.

Even when political statements can be checked, it is clear from the everyday practice of fact-checkers that most of them do not directly contradict the truth. An analysis strictly focused on the facts will find that, in the vast majority of cases, the fact-checked political statement needs some additional context, chooses a partial interpretation of data, or exaggerates a partial aspect of reality. Back to the "invasion" example, presenting the actual numbers is useful and a necessary part of what fact-checking does, but it cannot deny nor confirm that the slogan is true.

On other occasions, there is another big obstacle to anybody's ability to check the issues of the public debate against the truth and verifiable facts. That obstacle is our ignorance. It is very well known, at least since the seminal study of Allport and Newman, that ambiguity around important issues for the public is the basic condition for "rumours" – today we would probably call it "disinformation" – to thrive, much more than the sheer scarcity or abundance of information itself (Allport, G., Postman, L. 1947). Very often, it is not possible to verify crucial claims because the evidence is lacking or contradictory, or non-definitive. The "lab-leak" hypothesis about the origin of Covid-19 was pushed for months by many demagogues, professional contrarians, and even politicians, and for months the only sensible answer was that no sufficient evidence was known about the issue, albeit some research in that direction made the hypothesis look unlikely.

The same problem of lack of information makes it impossible to "fact-check" in the strictest sense, another phenomenon often included in the discussion around "disinformation." Conspiracy theories are often very complex descriptions of reality that, most of the time, simply cannot be proven or disproven since they take for granted a secret connection between entities such as Freemasons, the Church, secret societies and the like. Entire political movements and campaigns can be built around such unprovable narratives, what Richard Hofstadter called the "paranoid style" of politics

(Hofstadter, R. 1964). But those narratives cannot be properly demonstrated as false because it is impossible to demonstrate non-existence. As far as we know, the Illuminati were a very short-lived secret society founded in 1776 in Bavaria and largely extinct by the end of the century. However, very much like the famous Russell's teapot, nobody can rule out with certainty that they actually survived and thrived for three additional centuries, even if Russell would point out that the burden of proof lies upon the proponents of that survival.

Be as it may, the best that fact-checkers or anyone else can say about those theories is that they have no evidence behind them, or the evidence put forward is flimsy. This is a pretty weak answer to strong belief systems, such as the one developed by the believers in conspiracy theories. Similarly, very strong narratives in the political realm can be built around concepts that have very little proof behind them – and even appear upsetting or worrying by a large part of the population – but appeal to sizeable parts of the electorate, such as the theory of an "ethnic substitution" or Great Replacement allegedly underway in Western Europe. These kinds of theories have racist and white supremacist undertones and so are rejected with contempt by a majority of the public opinion. But their power resides outside the strict adherence to facts, even if that same majority tends to include the diffusion of such theories to the "disinformation problem," i.e., the idea that the believers in conspiracy theories mainly have the problem of getting their facts wrong. They rely on fact-checkers, among others, for correcting those facts.

This perspective largely misses the point. As Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca pointed out decades ago, a lot of human communication does not have the final aim of "informing" or "demonstrating" something in a rational way, but of persuading, influencing, or other non-rational ends. Political discourse, in particular, does not want to inform the audience: its final aim is to have its vote for the speaker. Where strictly rational argumentation is not involved, and probably that is the case for the vast majority of public debate, a point-by-point discussion of the verifiable facts in each statement – what fact-checking does – cannot directly challenge the general message and its force of persuasion. What fact-checking can do is provide context by analysing the facts beyond the narrative, not proving or disproving the narrative itself. The facts can be weak, uncertain, contradictory, and still, the narrative can be compelling, convincing, "true" in a sense different from the rational and scientific "truth" we commonly hold sacred.

In conclusion, the common framework for interpreting the current information crisis suffers from various misunderstandings: what fact-checking is and what it can and cannot do; the impact of false stories and how they spread; and what we label "disinformation". A new, general theory of the information crisis is urgently needed, in order to take the appropriate steps to counter it in the policy field, in the public debate sphere, and in practice. So let's conclude with our "fourth law":

(4) The problem of disinformation is actually not about disinformation.

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