

The consumerism of misinformation in health: the abject objects of desire

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Abstract *The challenge of analyzing the infodemic distortion and avid consumption of fake news is linked to the complexity of production, dissemination, and contamination of the social imagination. The modalities of uninformative situations and gaps in the conceptual framework fall into indeterminacy, although scant attention has been devoted to the reception of messages. This paper refers to the technological and cultural circumstances from which the production and uncontrollable consumption of lies thrive, often justified for different purposes. The centrality of mass deception is highlighted as an aggression to politics and public health in a socio-cultural context in which the addiction to excitement has become structural. Analytical tools from Türrcke's Philosophy of Sensation are used to understand the phenomenon of uninterrupted production of stimuli and imagery artifacts that incite addiction in narratives of deception and interactions without any relationship. The conclusion drawn is that in the context of the current "Media Age", new forms of ideology and alienation are involved in consumption cycles. The needs of group identity generate speech without dialogue and deterioration of communicative processes in which the power of conviction prevails over fact.*

Key words *Health communication, Social media, Internet and health, Misinformation, Frenzied Society*

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Introduction

The reduction of illiteracy rates and the popularization of newspapers in Europe substantially increased the number of producers and consumers of false or semi-false news. Hoaxes reached their apogee in 18th century London among an expanded readership, albeit an uneducated one with weak powers of political deliberation. The “primordial tweets” were short texts produced by “paragraph men”, proto-cronyms of the time who circulated in pubs and cafes distributing fragments of potentially scandalous news (possibly an embryo of the tabloids), published in periodicals to the extent of their plausibility and reception impact¹. These lies reproduced themselves in anecdotal niches, in a limited fashion in terms of media and receivers throughout history, until they reached the 20th century, when the dizzying expansion of the information society, also made the “disinformation society” prosper with its disastrous implications. At the end of the 19th century, an apocryphal text *The Protocols of the Sages of Siam* – scandalously plagiarized from *The dialogue in hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* published in 1864 – was widely disseminated in Czarist Russia as a protest against the regime of Napoleon III. The doctrine quickly spread through affluent ideological niches in several countries, and was translated into dozens of languages. As a banal truth already sufficiently consecrated, the fact did not contain the fake and the defamatory book conquered the bedside of Adolf Hitler, among many other nazis around the world in the decades and media afterwards. Umberto Eco, in the preface to Will Eisner’s “The Protocols” illuminates a point essential to understanding the insufficiency of the fight against disinformation centered on enlightening strategies:

*The most extraordinary aspect of the “protocols” is not so much the history of their inception, but their reception [...] and the history remains the same today, on the Internet. It is as if, after Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, one continued to publish textbooks stating that the Sun revolves around the Earth [...] it is not the “protocols” that generate anti-Semitism, it is people’s deep need to isolate an enemy that leads them to believe in the “protocols”*²(p.viii-ix).

Small, seductive stimuli, such as these plagiarized, made-up, and locally distributed texts, can survive the ages and reach calamitous proportions. Considering the social, cultural, and subjective conditions of production, the interest in the spectacular, defamatory, or revolting be-

comes more seductive – opening wide avenues for the market of excitement in a social system that feeds on and values the spectacle – as discussed below. Thus, the “devotees” of seductive conspiracy theories would be incited by the interest of behaviors and confirmation biases. They feel compelled to consume and disseminate untruths incessantly and compulsively, as if, in this replication movement, it was possible to convert convictions into factuality. Thus, even the narratives about which they are not fully convinced are echoed by the simple need to reaffirm and echo an uncritical, though contesting (or persecutory) experience. The attribute in question does not refer to the media used, nor to the recognition of moments of high sensitivity to lures and slanders. Allegorically, one could say that the key attribute for success in this market is linked to the “desire” element in the AIDA cycle (Attention-Interest-Desire-Acquisition) as formulated by the Marketing sciences.

The Media Age of Misinformation

More relevant than the sophistication of the formats and the authority/credibility of its transmitters, the Acquisition was due to the curiosity and unacknowledged “need” for the pearls of hoax offered and eagerly consumed. The object of consumption is linked to the inherent seductive nature of exclusive revelations of morally reprehensible behaviors and situations, as it is known that FN are always, in a way, attractive because they involve secrets with potentially resounding consequences. Like all stealth mysteries, they work well in abbreviated formats that incite, divert attention, and tighten bonds and dependence on their issuers. In order to deceive reason, arouse Desire, and seduce the opinions of the most vulnerable, the producers/broadcasters made use of the brevity of the messages to seduce their uneducated, albeit literate, audience (note that the repulsion to “long texts” is a persistent trait today). In other eras, the immeasurable power of laconic and (immorally) potent stimuli was already identified, although there were insurmountable obstacles regarding the anonymity of the senders and the identification and segmentation of the receivers more inclined to such form of stimulation.

The small gossips are affiliated to the need for acceptance and belonging to a collective – which greatly helped in the group organization of Sapiens to overcome the obstacles posed by the hostile environment as well as, and above all,

in the organization of collectivities against the enemies of the time³. The veracity of the assertions matters less than their “laceration power”, and the plausibility of the information becomes an irrelevant attribute under the lust of sharing. What matters to the “lacerators” is how much these versions reinforce their political position or the group’s worldview – knowing that, the more “organic” the activist, the more serious will be his degree of myopia regarding these aspects.

Political, cultural and subjective elements in mutual potentialization made possible by digital environments, can materialize in the need for consumption and dissemination of morally condemnable aspects of others, much more than for their virtues. We have to admit that in the digital networks of the misinformation society, convictions have spoken louder than facts. The sharing of versions makes us impulsive because the content of the “long texts”, and the reflection derived from them, is emptied before the need for engagement and group cohesion around concepts in the process of formation or deformation. In his research on fake news credibility and likelihood of sharing, Pennycook⁴ found that 37.4% of participants were more likely to share FN that agreed with their views, even if they knew they were untrue. This proportion dropped to 24% if the news, even when true, disagreed with the respondent’s beliefs⁴.

According to McAndrew and Milenkovic⁵, it is perfectly understandable to arouse greater interest in rumors that offer images of misfortunes, dishonors, and scandals involving people of high social status and purchasing power – possibly potential rivals at work or in the neighborhood. On the other hand, negative information about people considered socially inferior has extremely little appeal. The same goes for identity function, which strengthens the bonds of cooperation (or antipathy of intolerance) between social centers around lies and slander. The latter arouse greater or lesser appetite for FN according to their degree of distance from the target at which the slanders are directed. In other words, the seductive power of infamous lies about allies, friends and relatives is small, which would compromise the group’s level of cohesion. On the opposite ground, the more culturally distant or outsider the target of the slanders, the greater the desire for consumption of the misleading delicacies.

Lust, voyeurism and adultery in marriage with the truth in a horny society

In the 211 theses of the “society of the spectacle”⁶, Debord describes how this becomes the “spectacle of the spectacle” itself, as *sine qua non* condition for the reproduction of intensely market-driven systems. In these contexts, the consumption of tragic, sensual, or violent images – sensational in essence – are overestimated by the media and their consumers. Moreover, in mutual potentiation, the addiction to the “sensational” – at least in journalistic and academic circles – is associated with the imperative of precedence – whoever announces the sensational firsthand gets the best credit. Since the twentieth century, new forms of consumption and domination have emerged based on the flood of images coming, firstly, from TVs and magazines and, currently, from the “distraction media” that are characterized by the colossal discharge of imagetic stimuli that rob us of focus and interest in our experiences (*Erlebnis*) and loss of meaning for the elaboration of experience (*Erfahrung*).

Christoph Türcke⁷ in his book *Excited Society: Philosophy of the Sensation* updates Debord’s thesis, pointing out that turbo-capitalist societies are driven by relationships mediated by spectacular images whose image market produces, uninterruptedly, shocks that create vicious cycles of excitement, numbness, and new excitement. These shocks, or scares, would be sensations that grab all our attention – fruits of the terrifying and sensational would be, according to Türcke, the “sensation par excellence”⁷(p.119). In this perspective, it would be naive to believe that our Black Mirrors only fill our free time with instructive entertainment. Such a load of stimuli wears down the human ability to maintain focus on essentials such as enriching a political culture, what Türcke called “concentrated distraction”⁷. Our attention is so faded by lust/gluttony for misinformation and seductive stimulation of other orders that vigilance over what does not announce itself as spectacular (or does not arouse our indignation) simply does not rouse us from an uncritical slumber⁸. In other words, “sensation” used to be equivalent only to what was placed as the object of our perception. As stimuli have intensified, it has become distanced from its original connotation and has become the equivalent of something “worthy of being perceived with little effort” – linking only to what is “sensational,” that overflows from the ordinary experience in everyday life, shocking, indignant, surprising,

or, in short, exciting – even if for a fraction of a second. The sensation is understood by Türccke as what irresistibly seduces the perception as the indignation, the sensational and the picturesque propelled by lust, envy and media gluttony. Interesting to add to Türccke’s list are the vices in the risk narrative, namely the media’s inclination to emphasize risk ahead of safety and its paradoxical character of “being predictable though it cannot be predicted”. The excitement offered by the notion of risk can even be identified within anti-vaccination movements⁹, as well as at the heart of conspiracy theories, in general. Such a state of persistent imminence of danger and daily stimulation by warning about risks elevates the catastrophe to a genuine state of “tragic celebrity”, as happened in late April 1986 during the contamination from the Chernobyl plant disaster. On the political-communicative level how do we deal with fear if its causes are still incomprehensible, intangible or inaccessible on the microbiological level? In the midst of the climate of ignorance, indetermination, and astonishment at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, both official media and social networks proliferated misinformation about our public enemy number 1 – which was justified by the context of scarce scientific knowledge about its nature, forms of replication, contagion, and protective measures. As the months went by, besides the emphasis on the epidemiological risk, the addiction to the quick repercussion of incomplete, inaccurate, or even contradictory information about ongoing events grew in an amazing way, as genuine examples of misinformation mixed with the necessary disinformation for the surreptitious political purposes of that moment.

Our systems of cultural production remain under the influence of this logic that “micro-electronically tricks the desire of its customers more easily”(p.10). “The shock of the image has become the focus of a global regime of attention, which desensitize human attention through uninterrupted overload”(p.33). Türccke thus describes, as a central feature of the excited society, the uninterrupted generation of technological artifacts for the fruition of sharper images of these shock-generating elements. To this end, in the field of image enjoyment, every Black Friday sees the appearance of TV sets with screen definition larger than reality and as many inches as can fit into our living rooms. In the same way, the most popular “communication” artifacts proliferate, advertised based on the power of their lenses and the degree of definition of the images they pro-

duce. It is interesting to note that in the excited society, the images of the self – produced under the demand of the spectacular and the maximum stimulation of senses – are almost exclusively generated by the old telephones. For the aroused society, the catastrophe, the indignation over the lie or as its consequence, the lure for political capitalization, the “laceration” and the seduction of the selfies, among other forms of exercising this lust and gluttony, have transformed the practice of human communication. Engagement without participation and conviction without dialogue or reflection have been incorporated into the new ethos committed solely to imagetic excitement, stimuli, and audiovisual shocks. Sensation has become an uncritical addiction that intoxicates and diverts us from a sense of sobriety given to reflection and maturation of our experience (*Er-fahrung*).

The pandemic of COVID-19, coupled with the lust for FN that proliferated in its wake, gave rise to new forms of violence. As if the viral ravages of the invisible enemy – originating in poorly understood circumstances in distant places on the planet – were not enough, other forms of consequential violence have emerged, such as the infodemic. Suddenly we are forced to have to know all about “scientific validation of clinical trials” in order to be able to opt for the “best brand of vaccine”. As if it were not enough to deal with so many messages in so many WhatsApp groups, we are still exposed to the extra effort of having to consult fact checking agencies to understand and practice concepts necessary for our biosafety. We are also worn out having to, while maintaining civility, tolerate intolerance. The spin-doctors and chaos engineers long ago discovered that in media networks the stimuli that seduce for intolerance and hate homilies aligned to political agendas can also become valuable commodities¹⁰.

Conclusion

The set of platforms and media used to disperse malicious discourse has expanded since the times of the Ágora. Its exponential growth, especially since the twentieth century, has reached domains and resources for disinformation incomparably more dilated, rapid, cheap and segmented than the distribution of pamphlets in a public square in times of poor literacy of society. Besides all these powers, it is important to point out, we live the ethical shortage of the empire of fatuity

and superficiality, under the ever-clearer control of surveillance capitalism¹¹ that grows entangled in a lustful relationship with lies, manipulation and the excitement of deception. But how to put into practice the “attitudes of digital self-defense” suggested by Naomi Klein¹² in everyday confrontations with “Surveillance Capitalism”, as well as against some other modalities of 21st century capitalism?

Certain segments of the Excited Society adhere more and more frenetically and uncritically to fake news – either as consumers or producers – but always contaminated by increasingly intense doses of dopamine from image shocks, likes and shares. The logic of the excited society tends to promote the commodification of the morbid and the frenzy for lies, which leads to a state of media lethargy that exposes us to paradoxes: simultaneously or alternately stupefying and exciting. It is important to note, however, that addiction to the dissemination or consumption of misinformation compromises the subject’s relationship with himself and his sense of connection with others. In the Mediosphere of the excited society, the power of conviction has become much greater than that of truth, once the capacity of perception is overloaded by stimuli that excite and anesthetize the senses, especially in virtual communities based on misleading factoids. The producer-consumers who “inhabit” (isolated) such groups exercise their addictions by the instant dissemination of lies that end up contaminating the surrounding terrain. They thus commit a grave sin: fiction clouds their bond of fidelity in their relationship with reality.

Sapiens developed through a system of verbal transmission of information that, during the last century, was supplanted by technologies that transmit a gigantic volume of content to any corner of the planet without the need for technical knowledge for its reception. The communicative action to overcome ideologies and emancipate

the human being has been reduced to the alienated reproduction of memes and particles of sensational information, sometimes misleading. From the evolutionary perspective, just as the excessive supply of sugars led to obesity, the dopaminergic lust for sensation articulated to gluttony for its consumption and replication, led us to the present infodemic corruptions of communication. One realizes that disinformation has worked perfectly well in the dimensions of its expansion and reproducibility. Perhaps this is due to the digital networks in their effect of potentiating “affects”, as non-conscious, pre-linguistics and absolutely non-discursive inclinations, still external to the realms of verbalizable emotions^{13,14}. The ability to affect and be affected in the intermediary from one experiential state to another, or *affectus* in Spinoza, implies modifications in the disposition to action. They have no representational character and portray nothing but volitional inclinations in pursuit of objects of representation which, in a way, adds an interesting complexity to the issues highlighted here.

In short, in the context of this “Media Age”, how can we overcome the new modes of alienation involved in these cycles of consumption? Until then, in the corners of WhatsApp and Telegram, in the plains of Facebook and Reddit and in the showcases of Instagram we will continue like this, producing sensational images and reproducing discourses without dialogues, mediated and uncritical experiences that obliterate opportunities for experience (as *Erfahrung*), encouraging the aforementioned “conviction without reflection and without interlocutions. We conclude that the needs of group identity generate a deterioration of the communicative processes from which the power of conviction reigns over the factual. Interactions without relationality, participation without presence, knowledge without wisdom, and discourse without dialogue thus develop.

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