

Post-Truth: Hoaxes, Misinformation, Trust and Reputation in the Network Society

Luciano Paccagnella, University of Torino, Torino, Italy

ABSTRACT

Information quality is an increasingly pressing problem in network society, as it is the price we pay for the information overload afflicting us. This article illustrates three empirical cases that will help provide a better understanding of the range and breadth of misinformation, distinguishing between hoaxes, rumors, and conspiracies. The following sections discuss the limitations of remedies based on fact checking and debunking, and of proposed legislation to counter misinformation. The conclusions suggest several approaches to learning to deal with misinformation which should be addressed by future research: the processes of building and assessing reputation, the development of pragmatic trust, the dangers of the bubble effect, and the need for greater transparency concerning the algorithms that control online platforms.

KEYWORDS

Conspiracy Theory, Fake News, Hoaxes, Misinformation, Post-Truth, Reputation, Rumors, Sociology of Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

By nature, digital society tends towards the constant, progressive accumulation of data. New forms of social inequality are arising, not only in connection with the ownership and control of these data, but also and above all in people's ability to interpret, understand and use them to improve their lives. Today we live in a social ecosystem where data, information and knowledge are no longer scarce resources to be hoarded. On the contrary, we are in a permanent state of information overload.

Ordinary people take part in ambitious collective enterprises: they develop encyclopedias by contributing entries on topics where they have no specific expertise, or they present and publicly comment on events and news without being professional journalists. Though the contractions are by no means lacking, these enterprises do not founder into chaos as might be expected: in many cases, the products they beget are useful, usable and entirely respectable. In recent years, citizen participation has also been extended to scientific research, and has taken forms that can be seen as a break with the academic tradition, in a move towards what has been called post-academic science (Ziman, 2000) or Mode 2 science (Nowotny et al., 2001).

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These changes make knowledge increasingly difficult to define. No longer an ivory tower, science is now regarded as fully immersed in society, and thus subject to its constraints and, at times, its caprices. While it is true that society relies more and more on science and technology, it is no less true that the directions and modes of scientific development are increasingly dependent on policy decisions, which in turn reflect the public's culture, values, emotions, hopes and fears. This is especially clear when it comes to regulating, and possibly funding, scientific research in areas where public opinion is divided: genetically modified organisms, nuclear power, climate change, stem cell experiments and so on. Citizen science, by providing openings for active participation by non-specialists, also ends up by opening the black box of science to the public, revealing the inner workings that once were once concealed behind laboratory walls (Latour & Woolgar, 1979) and are now, ever more frequently, online for all to see. Thanks to the spread of open access, for example, the specialist literature not only circulates freely in the scientific community, but also falls into the hands of a reading public that is often ignorant of its lexicon and basic assumptions.

The question thus arises: what happens when scientific knowledge, like other forms of knowledge before it, lifts the curtains on the processes that produce it and allows various kinds of bottom-up participation, but these opportunities are – obviously – also available to laypeople who are unfamiliar with the most basic historical principles of the scientific method? Science differs from other forms of knowledge in a variety of ways: its hypotheses must be falsifiable (if a hypothesis is formulated in such a way that it is not possible to imagine a way to refute it, then it cannot be considered by science), its empirical results must be reproducible (no scientist will ever agree to discuss my discoveries with me unless I provide all the details needed to retrace my steps and arrive at the same findings), and its use of Occam's razor (the principle that if a phenomenon is fully explained by a simple theory, it is not necessary to look for a more complex one). What happens when a person who is ignorant of these and many other epistemological foundations of science can, thanks to the Internet, social media and open access, compete with a paper that has just been published in an international peer reviewed journal with a post on the same topic, but reaching diametrically opposite conclusions, in Facebook pages with names like "Things nobody will tell you"?

One of the results is the proliferation of fake news, hoaxes and online misinformation in general. Misinformation is increasingly acknowledged to be a true scourge of the network society. Some commentators have even held this more or less deliberate "information pollution" responsible for a number of unexpected events that have recently rocked the international scene, such as Brexit or Donald Trump's election as President of the United States. The concept of post-truth is fast becoming a part of everyday speech, particularly with reference to politics. The term has also begun to be used ideologically: "hoax", for example, is a charge leveled against adversaries' opinions to discredit them, at times even by those in high political office. This is what happened in Italy, when then-premier Matteo Renzi's blog post of April 14, 2016 openly labeled the referendum to curb offshore drilling as a "hoax", urging voters to boycott it¹.

Though it is true that the amount of online misinformation has grown in recent years, it cannot all be classified as hoaxes in the strict sense, and in many cases the boundaries between information and misinformation are fuzzy and highly subjective. It is thus worthwhile to try to distinguish between the various types of "misinformation" in order to gain a better understanding of the problem's nature.

METHODOLOGY

The first research question is as follows: is it possible, and useful, to distinguish between different types of misinformation?

This leads to a second question, which this article will not address directly, as it limits itself to suggesting directions for future research: on the basis of the answers to the first question, what strategies can be effective in dealing with misinformation in our daily lives?

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