

BOOK REVIEW :

Francesco Nicodemo, *Disinformazia.* *La comunicazione al tempo dei social, Venezia,* Marsilio Nodi, 2017

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There is growing concern today in Western democracies as to the spreading of fake news and their apparent pivotal role in influencing recent elections. Fake news and social media have been and continue to be an issue high on the agenda of politicians and communication professionals, particularly following the Brexit referendum and the Trump victory. These two events as well as recent elections in the EU are said to have been polluted by the viral spread of disinformation on social media, often amplifying citizen's current distrust both in traditional media and politics at large.

But fake news per se is nothing new: they have always existed. What is new is, on the other hand, their rise, indisputably linked to the revolution of social media platforms. Since their arrival, social media and new technologies have increasingly become people's privileged channel for information. By doing so, they created a new information ecosystem where news is filtered through algorithms and users get more and more enclosed in almost unbreakable "one-information" echo chambers².

How these new media work in ways that make it possible for disinformation to spread and how this has affected politics and political discourse is the core of *Disinformazia*: a book, written by Francesco Nicodemo (former communication advisor of Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, both former Presidents of the Council in Italy), a rather hands-on and pleasantly unconventional analysis of the interrelation between fake news, populism and social media. *Disinformazia* goes from analysing the workings of these new media to exhaustively exploring their interlinkages with disinformation, and its impact on politics, to finally proposing noteworthy and out of the

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2 According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, an echo chamber is "an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered." See online: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/echo_chamber.

ordinary solutions that can direct citizens towards the truth and help rebuild their trust in politics.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part, more theoretical and technical at times, sets the scene of the overall argument and starts by comparing the features and current role of the old and new media, to get to the workings of the web and social media platforms, those powerful public spaces where citizens get informed and misinformed. The book begins with a powerful opening: Nicodemo recalls when, 12 years ago Time Magazine celebrated “You,” as the person of the year in an enthusiastic headline that stated, “Yes, you. You control the information age: welcome to your world”. By reflecting on such headline Nicodemo asks himself and the reader if such statement is really true: “*are we really in control of information thanks to the Internet?*”

Nicodemo starts his analysis by questioning this very statement, and continues by arguing that, with the coming of the Internet, the long monopoly of news divulgation does not belong anymore to the traditional media: through Internet everyone has access to an unlimited amount of information sources, can share what they read and thus become a disseminator of information. In such a context, the author suggests the importance of a profound change in the communication line between the sender and the receiver. If before such a line was rather vertical and unidirectional, today it becomes a horizontal, many-to-many communication line with users sharing information among them, like in a circle.

But if these features make the Internet an innovative and useful means to foster participation, they also represent its pitfalls. While social media platforms have the power to connect people and expose them to diverse opinions, the filter bubbles they often create are exacerbated by the platforms’ algorithms, which are based on people’s previously online expressed ideas. As such, the web has become more and more tailor-made as regards people’s needs and strives thanks to its ability to facilitate a targeted delivery of information. This explains the emergence of “echo chambers”, in which users with similar beliefs get trapped, thereby amplify and reinforce existing opinions. The author, supported by a rich volume of references, thoroughly explores the link between echo chambers and algorithms and, eventually, disinformation. If echo chambers enclose people in bubbles, where they merely interact with like-minded people, they often lead, as research suggests (Del Vicario, S. Gaito *et al.* 2017), to the radicalization of the homogeneous groups’ beliefs, resulting in a polarization phenomenon, i.e. communities of differing opinions facing each other and fueling hate speech. According to Nicodemo, two explanatory factors come into play: the users themselves – with their natural choice to befriend and interact with like-minded individuals – and the very much-accused algorithms.

Algorithms are used by social media platforms to select and filter content they deem to be most interesting for each user according to the user's interactions and interest history, and to the number of likes and shares. However, being the main tools through which information is shown to platform users, algorithms have likewise created a sound environment for the spreading of fake news. In a time where trust in traditional media is fairly low (Newman and Fletcher 2017), the Internet and, particularly, social media constitute powerful tools to spread knowledge and information. Verification is not always an option, as the author describes in two examples related to Italian politics. The virality effect is sometimes faster than any potential fact-checking.

But if the book attempts to demonstrate in practice how the World Wide Web and its algorithms have revealed the harmfulness of disinformation and polarization, what is even more interesting is the author's investigation on the correlation between the digital world and politics. As Nicodemo highlights repeatedly; if the functioning of democratic systems requires a healthy public debate and if a large part of the public is informed and misinformed online, politics cannot ignore such mechanisms, all the more if politics experiences such effects first hand. This is the focus of the second chapter – the real cornerstone of the book – in which Nicodemo reflects and explores the link between disinformation, populism and citizens' endemic distrust in politics and science.

Relying on philosophical and sociological concepts in a postmodernist context, Nicodemo describes the current era as being “post-truth”, where the sense of loss of the postmodern man is very much visible in his inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. In the post truth era objective facts are not considered anymore as being as influential in shaping people's opinions as people's fears and own beliefs, emotion-driven falsehoods and sceptical views. In a context very much dominated by distrust, belief in conspiracy theories and confusion, it is easier for disinformation to flourish.

But if, as Nicodemo repeatedly stresses, the danger of being exposed to fake news has always existed, today it is being emphasized by the pervasiveness of social media, its algorithms (that determine what people see based on their interests and research history), or click baiting strategies, all confirming pre-existing prejudices and beliefs. This continuous challenging of truth has invaded politics where facts and data seem to be not enough anymore to trigger trust in political actors and generate consensus on public policies based on such data. As a matter of fact, the book goes deeper in exploring why and how disinformation has become key in political campaigns and in media strategies, distancing traditional journalism from its educational and democratic role.

Yet, while fact-checking exercises are being explored, populist movements, as Nicodemo suggests, have been exploiting both the current distrust of citizens towards politics as well the algorithms' tendency to foster sensationalist and often misleading information. Nicodemo argues that populism and the new media have been influencing and are depending on each other. He bases his argument on the assumption that digital media play a fundamental role in fostering populist narratives. While politics nowadays ought to adapt to the media market logic, the speed, the multitude of available channels, and infotainment, i.e. catchy and sensational content, create altogether a favourable ground for populist rhetoric to flourish. Nicodemo thereby particularly focuses on Donald Trump, the Five Star Movement and the Lega, both Italian political movements (both winners of the recent Italian elections), highlighting the link between the diffusion of fear-based messages and the success of the latter movements.

While the book repeatedly makes reference to a postmodern individual, that is: isolated, confused and without any reference point within a highly polarizing and deceptive digital ecosystem, Nicodemo also offers concrete recommendations. Going beyond a mere description of today's post-factual reality, he points towards a seemingly simple yet concrete solution: politics. Politics intended as civic engagement and commitment. Politics intended as an action of re-intermediation enabling to bridge the current gap between politicians and citizens, making them feel as part of an inclusive project. Nicodemo argues that this, moreover, was facilitated through storytelling. More specifically, in the chapter dedicated to storytelling, Nicodemo highlights and demonstrates (through an analysis of effective communication narratives of Obama, Justin Trudeau and Macron) how this technique can act on the emotional dimension of the receiver and trigger participation. The author argues that this is particularly true when storytelling occurs on social media, where the public finds its role in the dialogue and where the storyteller and the listener are on the same level. The communication becomes feedback-driven; a circular and horizontal exercise where narrative and dialogue become one. This type of communication can be particularly effective in politics and in combating the disaffection towards traditional party structures and institutions.

While social media led to new opportunities for communication and participation in the public debate, according to Nicodemo, only politics – experienced as authentic civic-mindedness and activism – can favour the evolution of citizens from passive to active online users. If the Internet has emphasized the role of each single user, becoming influencers, it also means being influenced at the same time. In the author's view, transforming Internet users into influencers, capable of mobilizing and activating their own communities, is a task that politics cannot ignore anymore, particularly in a time where post-truth becomes the main representation of reality. This is why political

parties, associations, trade unions still hold a key function and need to be adapted to the functioning of the internet.

If digital tools offer great opportunities for citizens to be politically active and informed, the re-intermediation of political parties is still fundamental because, according to Nicodemo, they are the drivers of informed discussions and opinions. To do so, Nicodemo imagines a model of a new “digital party” that reduces the distances between the top and the base of the pyramid and where knowledge, ideas and competences are intertwined and exchanged. This, in the author’s view, can be achieved by building a network of organized online communities, each one led by a single “community organizer” acting as the connecting dot between communities and the central management board of the party. This way the party becomes a network of many networks where each online community strengthens the feedback and the connection between local citizens and party management in a circular and participative way. This way, the book concludes, “trust in politics and politicians is rebuilt and each isolated and often passive user becomes an active and mobilized citizen ready to offer his contribution and be the others’ reference point and at the same time the protagonist of a wide inclusive project”.

Building on a reasoned and concrete analysis of the means through which disinformation is spread online and its impact on politics, the book draws a deep link between politics and social media. Through 240 pages of detailed references and first-hand experiences, Nicodemo conveys the need to stop and reflect on the man’s chaotic condition and how the latter is influenced by this new digital era.

How can one believe in fake news? Why can some content be viral in a few hours, when it is clearly false? Why do many people without a scientific background today question the need, for example, to get vaccinated? These are questions to which Nicodemo attempts to give answers and solutions from a practitioner point of view. Many case studies presented have been experienced by the author himself and this is exactly where the power of the book is: its capacity of conveying not just theoretical knowledge but real and concrete practices that can be further developed and applied in our reality.

Despite a discouraging description of a historical time where uncertainty and polarization are the rule, the overall message that the book leaves to the reader is a positive one: an invitation to rediscover positive values such as empathy and trust through the revitalization of politics and of its communication approach.

Works cited

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