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## **Middle Class Crisis and the ‘Sharing Industries’ as the Main Flywheels of the Producers of Post-truth Political Communication on Social Media.**

If the internet and social media were initially characterised as platforms for empowering people (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013), recently they have emerged as powerful instruments for spreading fake news (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018). That is to say, whereas social media were a synonym for protest groups against social injustice, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Springs, they are increasingly becoming a synonym for fake news.

Fake news is a journalistic umbrella term. Among mainstream media, here defined as “traditional forms of mass communication, such as newspapers, television, and radio (as opposed to the Internet) regarded collectively” (English Oxford Living Dictionaries), fake news is disinformation purveyed through alternative news sources other than mainstream media. Among politicians, the term fake news has been used to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017:5). Despite the attempts of academics to elaborate the term fake news by using a number of appropriate definitions to describe the complex phenomena, it is and will likely remain the term used by mass media and in popular discourse. This paper will not use the array of terminology proposed by researchers (boyd, 2017; Marwick, 2017; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2016; Wardle 2017; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017), rather it will limit itself to the use of the term ‘post-truth’, designated word of the year in 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries, (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>), and fake news. This paper highlights an important distinction within the terms post-truth and fake news, between disinformation, that is, when false news is deliberately distributed, and misinformation, when the user who shares the information is not aware that it is false, the latter typical of sharing on social media.

While the term post-truth as it is currently understood has been in use since 1992 (Kreitner, 2016), politicians have always lied (The Economist, September 2016). Nor is fake news a novelty, as disinformation has existed since the time of the ancient Romans and Persians, and was also used by the ancient Chinese empires (Weedon et al. 2017:4). What is it then that makes fake news today different and why is it now attracting so much attention?

2016 was the year in which fake news was first used intensively to influence the information ecosystem with the aim of affecting political outcomes in democratic countries. Initially in June, during the UK referendum on Brexit. The win for Brexit was in part attributed to widespread circulation of fake news regarding the pros and cons of EU membership. In November, fake news was credited with influencing Trump’s victory in the U.S. presidential election (Weedon et al., 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2018; Roeder, 2018), and in December, fake news was alleged to have influenced Italy’s referendum on constitutional reform. Subsequent examples include the Italian political elections of March

2018 which were also alleged to have been influenced by fake news (Alto Data Analytics, 2018; Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, and Nielsen, 2018; Fubini, 2018).

Given that fake news is said to be having an impact on political outcomes in the western world, the question this paper poses is: what are the factors that have facilitated the influence and spread of fake news on social media? This paper argues that a combination of independent circumstances has led to the intensive reach of fake news, which can be encapsulated in two key elements. The first, that mainstream media have not been able to counter post-truth communication in influencing public opinion (Harrison, 2017), and the second, that the 'sharing industries' (Meikle, 2016), i.e. social media, have indirectly promoted the spread of fake news.

To address the first factor, given that mainstream media and in particular journalism, often referred to as the Fourth Power, enjoys tradition, authority and powerful means, why did it fail in influencing public opinion to counter disinformation?

Loss of public trust in the institution of mainstream media has been repeatedly cited as a key factor in its dwindling influence. Participants at a conference 'Investigative journalism in a post-truth world' (Wells, 2017), organised in London in early 2017 argued that certain mainstream newspapers were responsible for degrading public trust in traditional journalism, thereby encouraging the growth of social media as an alternative source for news. One example given was the practice of 'monstering' which is fairly common among newspapers in the UK. It is a campaign of denigration and delegitimization of people and groups even those outside of politics in the form of a severe reprimand or scolding, or a highly critical verbal attack. At a UNESCO conference in 2017, 'Journalism under fire: Challenges of our time' (UNESCO, 2017a), Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Serge Schmemmann said: "journalism in the traditional sense of major television stations, newspapers, they are in a crisis. Largely financial, but also in terms of content, competition, readership" (UNESCO, 2017b). According to the President of the World Editors Forum, Marcelo Rech, the challenges to journalism include: "the lack of public trust in the institution of journalism, the development of echo chambers on social media, and challenges to economic models" (UNESCO, 2017c).

In response to this analysis, it should be noted that the loss of the mainstream media's monopoly in informing the public at large is also due in part to the rise of the mass use of the internet and social media (Newman, 2011), and the parallel reduction in the circulation of newspapers in the west (while Asia continues to enjoy growth in sales, other continents had varying rates of declining circulations; World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, 2017). Hence, whilst journalism may bear some responsibility for the crisis, it appears that there may be other factors underpinning the lack of public trust in mainstream media.

Reading the morning newspaper is the realist's morning prayer.  
(Hegel, 2002:247)

To explore in more detail the factors underlying mainstream media's loss of influence in moving public opinion, the paper turns to examine, the nature and social meaning of the news and the traditional base for mainstream media. Carey explains that "news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it." (2009:17). "It is a form of culture invented by ... the middle class largely in the eighteenth century" (17) and "as such does not represent a universal taste or necessarily legitimate form of knowledge (Park, 1955: 71–88) but an invention in historical time, that like most other human inventions, will dissolve when the class that sponsors it and its possibility of having significance for us evaporates" (Carey, 2009:17). "Like any invented cultural form, news both forms and reflects a particular 'hunger for experience', a desire to do away with the epic, heroic, and traditional in favor of the unique, original, novel, new— news. This 'hunger' itself has a history grounded in the changing style and fortunes of the middle class" (Carey, 2009:17).

These critics argue that not only was the invention of the news a by-product of the rising, literate middle class in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the fortunes of mainstream media today are closely tied to the fortunes of the middle class. Historically the middle class represents those who were not part of the proletariat or the aristocracy, that is "the class which in France and England is directly and in Germany, figuring as 'public opinion', indirectly in possession of political power" (Engels, 1993:14). Researchers define the middle class as "those with an income that is two-thirds to double that of the U.S. median household income, after incomes have been adjusted for household size" (Pew Research Center, 2015:2)

Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in 2017 officialised the current crisis of the middle class in the advanced economies, which had previously been reported by researchers (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 2014 it was reported that "the share of Americans who identify with the middle class has never been lower, dropping to 44% in the latest survey from 53% in 2008" (Kochhar and Morin, 2014), as a result of the recession hitting harder the "middle-skilled white- and blue-collar jobs" (Autor, 2010:2), rather than lower and higher categories, a trend which "is not unique to the United States, but rather is widespread across industrialized economies" (p.3). Lagarde reported that where the middle class has shrunk "there have been signs of lack of trust, lack of hope, disenchantment with many of the principles and vision that people had for their future" (Bloomberg, 2017), and warned that inequality and mistrust fuels populism. In Europe the middle class is not only under pressure financially but is also "disillusioned about the future", remarks the Italian Economy and Finance Minister Pier Carlo Padoan, "saying no to whatever the policy leaders suggest" (Bloomberg, 2017), a behaviour which is inflamed by the belief that its children will be "worse off financially" (Wike, 2016).

By considering the news as an artefact of the middle class in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Park, 1940; Carey, 2009), which had as its main target audience the middle class itself, this paper argues that there is a strong socio-cultural interdependence between journalism and the middle-class, which roots the loss of faith in and attention towards mainstream media in the middle-

class crisis. Thus, it is the crisis of the middle class, i.e. the thinning of the main reference public of major newspapers, which may be underpinning the inability of the Fourth Power to successfully oppose disinformation. In addition, mainstream media represents the economic establishment (“the news is what elites say and what non-elites do”, Katz, 2014:460), by whom the middle-class has felt betrayed, thus fuelling their disenchantment and pushing them towards alternative news sources. Parenthetically, in their role as opinion leaders for the lower classes (Lazarsfeld et al, 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Katz, 1957, Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015; Winter & Neubaum, 2016), the betrayed middle-class has influenced the “less active sections of the population”, moving them towards alternative and ‘hidden truths’ available online, in a mechanism spreading gradually from higher to lower-status individuals (Rogers, 2003), resembling a ‘populism 2.0’ (Gerbaudo, 2015; Fuchs, 2017).

This paper will now turn to examine the economic aspects and mechanisms contributing to the spread of fake news on social media, that is, “the motivations of those who create this content” and the “the ways this content is being disseminated” (Wardle, 2017).

A powerful economic driver for the creation and spread of fake news is the ability of private individuals to earn money through the use of Google AdSense, the most popular among similar programs, which pays the website owner for each user who has been exposed to or clicked on an ad. An example of how this mechanism operates can be seen in an Italian website dedicated to publishing fake news, which was active well before fake news became a popular slogan. The website "Senza censura" (i.e. without censorship), fabricated and published gruesome news stories, with a strong racist component, using explicit titles about terrible crimes, mostly committed by African immigrants, cruelly avenged by the Italian “victims” (Di Fazio, 2015). The website was active until September 2015, when the Italian police denounced the website owner and closed down the website, on the basis that he was responsible for instigating racial discrimination. Heavily followed, the website attracted 500,000 readers a month, and with the news that finally attracted the attention of the police, there were 500,000 readers in a single week. In an interview, the website’s owner said: "Observing from the news the deeds of a well-known politician, with his famous populist speech against migrants, I immediately noticed the considerable attention that his words attracted, and then I thought of creating a site with speeches and similar rhetoric: if a member of parliament can do it, why can't an unemployed person do it? " His purpose was to maximise the number of visitors to his website, thereby increasing his revenue from Google AdSense. Visitors were directed to the site through social media posts. The author of the website alleged he was not a racist, but rather a young unemployed person who was only interested in the economic aspect: he wanted to make money by giving the reader what the reader wanted.

Another example of economic interest driving the creation of fake news, refers to an economic boom in Macedonia (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). In November 2016, more than 100 websites were identified as originating from a single town in the Republic of Macedonia. Almost all these sites had published content in favour of Donald Trump’s

election for the presidency of the US, hence they were directed exclusively to an American audience. These heavily-trafficked sites had American-style names like WorldPoliticus.com, TrumpVision365.com, USConservativeToday.com, DonaldTrumpNews.co, and USADailyPolitics.com and published mostly unverified content in favour of Trump, as well as fake news disparaging Hillary Clinton. The young Macedonians, some of them teenagers, who ran the websites reported that they did not care about politics or Donald Trump, they just wanted to make money through Google AdSense, like the manager of the Italian website. These young people said that the best way to generate traffic is to create scandalmongering and false content, that satisfies Trump supporters, who were also channelled to the Macedonian websites through posts on social media. The Macedonians created websites with news for the American public and not for the Macedonian public for the simple reason that clicks on advertiser banners by users coming from richer countries like the United States paid a lot more than clicks by Macedonian users.

In November 2016 the Director of 'Product Management, Sustainable Ads' at Google, announced the introduction of a new 'AdSense misrepresentative content policy' pursuant to which action was taken against nearly 200 website owners who were permanently 'kicked out' by the AdSense network (Spencer, 2017). Some of them transferred to use other similar programs such as Publy.net (Rovelli, 2017).

There is yet another aspect to consider in the context of economic incentives to create and spread fake news: science disinformation. In no uncertain terms this practice is denounced by former and current editors of well-established scientific and medical journals, for example Smith, the former editor of a major scientific editing house, the *BMJ (British Medical Journal)* in 2005 reported that medical journals are an extension of the marketing department of the pharmaceutical companies and 'these journals mainly publish studies funded by pharmaceuticals and strictly partisan'. Angell, the former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, reluctantly stated that after working for 20 years as editor, she can no longer believe much of the medical research that is published (2009). Or Horton, editor of *The Lancet*: in 2004 said he was under pressure to write more favourable reviews to the pharmaceutical industries, and more recently in 2015 he wrote that, much of the scientific literature, perhaps even half, could be false. A 2016 study found that one industrial clinical trial out of every 5, published in the most important medical journals, is designed for marketing, rather than for scientific purposes (Barbour et al.).

To go beyond pharmaceuticals, another study published in November 2016 states that the sugar-producing industries fund research demonstrating that sugar is unlikely to cause cardiovascular disease (Kearns et al., 2016).

Press releases and public relations do the rest, ensuring mass media exposure of studies published in scientific journals. This system indirectly overshadows opposing voices and studies that do not make use of public relations agencies.

Sharyl Attkisson, an Emmy award-winning journalist, explains that lobbying activities to influence legislative power have become less important than so-called astroturfing (2016). Astroturfing is a term derived from the English word 'grassroots', meaning popular social movements born of the people. *Astroturf* is a registered trademark for synthetic grass, so

astroturfing refers to fake popular movements. This term has been in use since the 1980s but exploded with the advent of the internet and social media. Astroturfing refers to marketing activities that create a fictitious popular consensus to support the products of certain companies or delegitimize the products of competing companies. There are agencies that sell fake supporters on social media who are also very active on Wikipedia. They also hide their fake news behind the cover of real news, thus making it more likely that users will accept their falsehoods.

Having reviewed some of the economic motives underpinning the creation of fake news, whether for personal, political or industrial interests, this paper now turns to examine the mechanisms that facilitate its spread on social media.

Meikle gives a broad and at the same time neatly-bound definition of social media, i.e. sharing industries, as follows: “networked database platforms that combine public with personal communication” (2016:6). Sharing industries are networked because of the use of technologies which offer a model of behaviour, but ultimately do not determine their final usage. Social organisation together with technology embodies the network. The terms database and platform denote a business model which exploits the networked digital media. Users’ personal information both private and public, from movies to food preferences, from habits, to websites or geo-localities visited, both intentionally or unintentionally communicated, are stored in a database and exploited for commercial purposes. The words public and personal communication relate to the cultural and behavioural aspects of social media, in particular to the individual spreading of their own meanings in the space shared with media industries. Meikle explains that not all smartphone apps are social media. For example, Uber, an app that allows users to connect with non-professional taxi drivers, should not be considered social media, because even if it relies on a networked database and on the ‘share economy’, it currently lacks personal and public communication. This last aspect interconnects with the use of user-generated content (UGC) and the making and doing culture (Gauntlett, 2011), made by the business model named Web 2.0 (Web 2.0, 2004; O’Reilly, 2005).

The fundamental terms of Meikle’s definition are “database” and “interconnected”. In fact, all social media algorithms work on databases, which contain individual users’ information starting from email, username and phone number through which access is granted to social media. Social media constantly push their users to post public messages on their timeline, send private messages through messenger, add friends, become members of new pages, publish new photos, write more comments, post videos, etc. ... “What’s on your mind?” asks Facebook every time we open our timeline; What are you reading? What movie are you watching? In short, Facebook invites us to undertake activity with self-generated or shared content, text, photographs or video, or to transmit feedback using the classic thumbs up of the “like” button, to which have been added various emoticons to ensure more accurate feedback on users’ thoughts and reactions.

In Sweden, 100 km from the Arctic circle, Facebook built its first European data centre (Harding, 2015). It has been running since 2013. Each day, Facebook alone has to manage

approximately 350 million photos published; 4.5 billion "likes"; ten billion messages, and so on (Kotenko, 2013). Data centres require powerful cooling systems and building them near the Arctic circle can be an energy-saving solution, which has already been followed by Google. These data which are voluntarily shared through users' online activity are collected and organised in databases to be sold to marketers and contain users' preferences on personal life, desires, ideas and politics expressed through words, images, shares and likes, also the time users take to read a text or to look at an image. To be of interest for marketing purposes, the databases must be constantly updated, hence the endless push for users to engage, and the need for the construction of new data centres. The stock market value of social media companies is linked not to the number of subscribers, but to the amount of traffic and therefore of shares that happen on the social network.

On most web sites, especially news sites, alongside each article is a "Share" button on Facebook, or Twitter, Google+ and LinkedIn which can be read as a 'share your information with advertising agencies'. Similarly, the 'like' button that often appears on sites outside of Facebook, gives Facebook the ability to track our readings on that site, even without clicking 'like', even without logging in to Facebook. All this information is subsequently stored in databases interconnected with databases of other companies. One example is when advertising for a product recently viewed on Amazon appears in Facebook's timeline. Paraphrasing Feuerbach's "we are what we eat" (Cherno, 1963), it can be said that 'we are what we share'. Castells in 2009 said that: "in our society communication protocols are not based on the sharing of culture, but on the culture of sharing" (p.126). As Meikle says, we can talk about the industry of sharing, because the whole social media system is based on sharing: "The word share is at the heart of social media." (2016:24).

Unsurprisingly, Facebook never mentions this business model in its mission statements, focusing rather on its ability to connect people. The Facebook mission statement has changed several times since 2004 (Reagan, 2009; Kelly, 2017), the most recent one that emerged in 2018 is: "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/facebook/about/>). However, the statement in force between 2009 and 2017 is very useful to explain the way Facebook works: "Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (<https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>). Based on this mission statement, Meikle describes how Facebook represents itself to the world (2016:37). Two sentences, the first of which has as its subject Facebook which offers a space to connect; the second is about people (not users or customers), who use Facebook to communicate and share. There is no mention of Facebook as a company with costs and revenues, exploiting user content for commercial purposes. Rather, Facebook is presented as a public good, and therefore, it is not surprising that most users don't think twice about providing personal data to Facebook, in the same way as they would the city council.

Recalling Meikle's definition of the sharing industries, it can be said that the growth of social media has contributed to the rapid spread of fake news. Several of the mechanisms within social media that facilitate the spreading of fake news are discussed below. In 2006, Facebook became accessible to everybody, and not only to American students; YouTube was bought by Google, and Twitter was created - just to name a few of the best-known developments. In December 2009, Google implemented epochal changes in its search engine, which caused what was called a "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011). That is, results of searches made by users on Google would for the first time be influenced by the analysis of 57 indicators in relation to the user, including: geolocalities, browser used, previous searches, sites visited, along with a whole series of other personal information that Google was able to collect even from the content of emails sent via Gmail. Thus, since December 2009, while searching for the exact same words in Google's search engine, each user receives personalised results (Schmidt, 2010), not only in terms of the order of those results but also in their number, thus creating a bubble of filtered reality within which the user remains trapped. The following research demonstrates how social media exploits the filter bubble algorithms for commercial purposes. In 2010, researchers conducted a study in collaboration with Facebook of 61 million users in the United States. The research was carried out just before the mid-term elections, i.e. Congressional elections (Bond et al., 2012). One group was encouraged to vote with a link to the nearest polling stations; with a clickable button with the words "I voted"; and showing how many Facebook users had already clicked that button. Another group was shown the same information, but with the addition of six images of friends who had already clicked on "I voted". A third group received no information at all. The members of the 3 groups were compared to public voter lists. The results showed no significant difference in the number of voters among those who received the message without images and those who did not receive it at all. Rather, there was a significant difference in voter turnout between those who had received pictures of friends who had clicked "I voted", and the other two groups. The research concluded that the message with images of close friends who had voted, had succeeded in turning out tens of thousands of users. This study not only shows us how close bonds can influence the decision to vote, but also how well-designed algorithms can create an environment that favours certain behaviours over others.

Echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001, 2007) are another powerful mechanism that can facilitate the transmission of fake news. Echo chambers are groups, or an aggregation of people united by the same interests or worldview. They facilitate the circulation of certain information more successfully and faster, which is what the members of the group want, that is, "listening to louder echoes of their own voices" restricting "themselves to opinions and topics of their own choosing" (2007:13).

The algorithms that create filter bubbles and echo chambers, facilitate users' ability to access information of interest, not only fake news that feeds peoples' anxiety, but also opportunities for coming together to discuss a certain type of news and possibly organise actions, inside or outside the group to which users belong. Through the algorithms, alternative associative realities can be created that could not exist outside of the Internet, for

example due to the geographical distance between the interested parties, or because of immobility among users, that is, not being able to move out of the house due to old age, chronic diseases or accidents.

The power of the algorithms was demonstrated in a psychological study published in 2014 conducted by Kramer et al. in collaboration with Facebook, which tells us how the manipulation of news that appears in the news feed of users can affect their emotions (Kramer et al., 2014). The study's ethics were questioned because users did not know that their emotions were intentionally manipulated for purposes of the study. The results show to what extent Facebook is able to make users feel good-humored or in a bad mood, using minor changes to the news page algorithm, by limiting the amount of positive or negative messages that come from friends' posts. By making the messages that appear in the newsfeed less positive, the mood became negative. By making the messages less negative, the mood became more positive.

In addition to users' data being exploited by marketing agencies in order to recommend products for purchase online or on supermarket shelves, such data can also be of interest for political purposes. An example of Facebook data being used for political ends is Cambridge Analytica, a British/American company that deals with the analysis of data and strategic communication in electoral processes. It designed a unique methodology to analyse people in great detail through their activities on Facebook. Cambridge Analytica's services were used by the US presidential candidate, Donald Trump (Cambridge Analytica, 2016). Trump used the company to reach his potential voters as well as the undecided, devising different messages, based on personal data, such as age, race, political preferences, income, occupation, etc. using updated strategies with immediate effect based on the constant updating of their databases. Most of the information was harvested from Facebook profiles. Cambridge Analytica is also alleged to have worked for Brexit advocates during the UK referendum campaign (The Guardian, 2018).

Facebook (Weedon, J., et al., 2017), confirmed the existence of activities influencing public opinion for political purposes called "information operations" or "influence operations", and stated that there is a strong will to counter this phenomenon. The report confirms the activity of foreign governments in influencing the US electorate during the presidential elections in 2016, and further reports that 30,000 Facebook profiles, found to have been acting with malicious political intent, were closed during the 2017 presidential election campaign in France. Social media are under scrutiny for their role in spreading fake news, and Facebook has even been threatened with a 50 million euro fine from the German government. (Eddy and Scott 2017).

The challenge for social media is to find a way to curb the spread of fake news without limiting the creation / sharing of data that are their main source of income. To avoid imposing a blanket ban on the sharing of information, social media's main income generator, social media companies such as Facebook have started to cooperate with external organisations to assist them in policing the circulation of fake news. While fake news will

not disappear entirely, it will still be possible to share fake news stories, the algorithms will give them a lower priority in the visibility list, perhaps to the point that it will be possible to see them only if you go to the personal profile of those who posted them. In addition, warnings about their credibility will appear, with links to alternative articles to offset the false or allegedly false news. This approach will require increased user activity, as users will identify and signal fake news stories.

One of the first cases of which we know, in which Facebook fact checkers were to highlight fake news stories, was reported in March 2017. News was circulating that the Irish people would be brought to the US as slaves. Facebook tested its fact checking system on this news story in the San Francisco area, allowing users to report this as a fake news story. The news was first verified by independent bodies, and if it was found to be a hoax, a warning appeared about the untrustworthy content together with the names of the organisations that were challenging it. In the example of the Irish slaves in America, the Associated Press news agency, and the American urban legend debunker website Snopes were the control bodies (Hunt, 2017). If a user decided to open the news anyway, another warning window appeared. And the same warning appeared again if the user wanted to share the fake news. We do not know yet if this will be the method adopted all over the world. The paradox is that once interested users knew that the circulation of that news was being hindered, they worked harder to share it and circulate it.

It is worth noting here that not all sites that claim to patrol the news are created equal as there is currently no regulation of these sites or the people who work for them. Indeed, the American Snopes site referenced above has been identified as an Astroturfer by Attkisson (2015, 2016). Like Snopes, many debunker sites could be undertaking counterinformation activities in favour of companies that make large investments in marketing, organising alleged activists on social media to promote their "scientific truth" while denigrating dissenting users on personal rather than scientific grounds. One of the Italian 'fact checkers' ('Butac') empowered by the former president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies to participate in the online debunking of fake news was closed down 'subject to preventive seizure' on 6 April 2018 by the Italian police as it was being sued for defamation (hate speech and 'fake news') by a doctor. <http://www.brindisireport.it/cronaca/sequestro-sito-butac-l-oncologo-brindisino-mai-detto-che-il-cancro-si-cura-con-la-preghiera-e-la-dieta.html>. It was then reopened a few days after on 10 April 2018.

## CONCLUSIONS

The first part of the paper discussed the involvement and responsibility of politics and journalism in the spread of fake news, noting that mainstream media were not able to counter post-truth news stories to influence public opinion, a failing which was underpinned by the crisis of the western middle-class (Kochhar and Morin, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015). This paper has proposed a strong socio-cultural dependence between mainstream media and the middle class (news is an artefact of the middle class in the 18th century, Park, 1940; Carey, 2009), which helps to elucidate why the middle-class crisis in the west has led

to a loss of faith in and attention to mainstream media (Swift, 2016). In addition, mainstream media represents the economic establishment (“the news is what elites say and what non-elites do”, Katz, 2014:460), by which the middle class has felt betrayed, another motivation for turning against it.

The second part addressed the economic interest which underlies the spread of fake news. Firstly the economic interest in the creation of fake news, both through the number of clicks on advertising banners, and in favouring certain commercial products instead of others; secondly, the business model which exploits the networked digital media and indirectly promotes the spread of fake news, i.e. the sharing industries, which collect data shared by users’ online activities, and organise them in databases to be sold to marketers. We have seen the results of some research showing how algorithms used by the sharing industries that create realities such as filter bubbles and echo chambers, which are more likely to catch “individuals with both very low interest in politics and low media diversity” (Dubois and Blank, 2018:740). They can be crucial in favouring higher sharing activities of fake news thanks to cues like familiarity through the repetition of the message, endorsement of friends and family and self-confirmation bias and a “desire to be vindicated” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017:47), which channel actions and moods of public opinion.

Fake news or "information operations" as Facebook calls them in its report, already existed before the advent of electronic technology, with the ancient Romans, and they never ceased to exist. What makes the difference today is the sharing industries (Meikle, 2016). Umberto Eco said that social media "give the right to speak to legions of idiots who spoke only at the bar after a glass of wine, without damaging the community" (2015). In 2008 there were 100 million active users on Facebook (defined as accessing their profile at least once a month). In January 2018, this number had increased to 2.2 billion (Statista, 2018). It means that a large part of the global population is now active on Facebook, many with no knowledge of the Internet outside of a smartphone and outside of Facebook, no cultural tools to call into question alarmist news. The difference has been made by the sharing industries who have conferred on everybody the "right to speak" based on the need to constantly increase the number and the activity of its users, through the culture of sharing. To obviate the information overload that was a preoccupation in the 90s, algorithms were created that favour mechanisms such as filter bubbles, and the resulting echo chambers, where people find comfort in seeing their anxieties confirmed, sharing their special interests. The Facebook newsfeed automatically prioritises what interests the users most, making information the user is likely to want to read more visible, and making it more likely the user will share such information. This is the mechanism through which the false and macabre racist news published by the young unemployed Italian, reached such high levels of circulation. Social media is designed to promote more sharing activity. Social media algorithms are the fulcrum of the sharing industry and are mainly responsible for the exponential increase in disinformation on the internet.

In Umberto Eco’s ‘social media bar’ where people can damage the community, it will be interesting to see how the giants of the web square the circle, that is: on the one hand to limit the number of fake news stories in circulation without oversight becoming a tool of

ensorship in the hands of governments and multinationals (Marwick, 2017), and on the other hand, to uphold freedom of speech and sharing, their primary source of income. A healthier information ecosystem would require higher levels of public trust in traditional media which would work to oppose disinformation, through increased transparency, both in terms of the chain of command from the owners of the newspapers to the publishers, and about what they do and why they do it, as well as better economic conditions for the middle class.

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