The rhetoric side of fake news: A new weapon for anti-politics?

Abstract

As an "insidious form of post-truth rhetoric", fake news find a fertile ground in the complex scenario of new media and fruitful fertilizers in several psychological foundations and social phenomena. As a consequence, social scientists and psychologists are more and more interested to deepen these dynamics. Nonetheless, the study of the discursive and rhetoric facets of fake news has been rather neglected. The aim of this work is to investigate their discursive construction in one of the preferred domains of this misleading process of construction of reality, the political world. Through the discourse analysis applied to several fake news involving a very popular female Italian politician, we emphasize the risk of empowering the (already widespread) anti-political feeling.

Keywords

Introduction

As we all know, "Man shall not live on bread alone", but mostly on information, that is the special "intangible asset" having a social nature: it consists of interactions and exchanges coming from the need to understand how things go. Inspired by the desire for knowledge and truth, the flow of information, one time trough narratives, press, radio and TV, is nowadays mainly guaranteed through the "big net" of virtual communication. A noteworthy challenge thrown by Internet to the human condition is founded on the demanding boundary between true and false, actual and artificial. In the post-truth reality, that boundary melts in the phenomenon of fake news.

One of the last cries comes even from the Pope, who lets us imagine fake news as a "cunning snake". Joining the alarmed international voices about a so increasing and worrying phenomenon, this metaphor focuses on two main features of fake news. Firstly, they are able to disguise, thanks to their being constructed as more or less credible and plausible stories; secondly, they can bite, in accordance with their capacity to "poison" public opinion, to keep attention and to appeal to socially widespread stereotypes and prejudices.

This is, of course, a very old problem, as throughout history fake news played an active role to justify attacks on minorities and immigrants, to defend dispossessions, tortures, and massacres as well as to rationalize colonialist expectations. Nonetheless, in the last years they received a growing attention, especially since the last Presidential Election in

the USA in the 2016 (Riva, 2018). Even if it is not clear the real contribution of fake news in the victory of Donald Trump (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), from that moment fake news gained a high position in both political and media agendas. Political domain, economic sphere, public opinion, social networks and so on: in the analysis of this phenomenon, all of these social actors interact in more and more uncontrollable both cause-effect and spiral processes. Therefore, as in other critical historical junctures, alongside the several disciplines focusing on that problem, social psychology can improve the understanding of how "morals and mores are evolving in tandem with broader changes in literate technologies, epistemologies, and political economies" (Miller & Leon, 2017, p. 11).

In their great and unique power to intercept secrets and to enable exhibitions, new media are the undisputed protagonists of the "Killing Joke" of the 21st Century (Dornan, 2017). Announcing, interacting, to be noticed, are social actions that, on the one side, trace and express one's identity statement and, on the other side, act as a record of incremental revelations. If "our smartphone is a vast psychological questionnaire that we are constantly filling out, both consciously and unconsciously" (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017), this means that we are feeding that joke more than ever.

1. From civil to psychological concerns

Modern Era is characterized by the circulation of ideas and opinion. Thanks to the Gutenberg's revolution more than 500 years ago, two opposite chances arose: the first sparks of democracy, thanks to the emergence of public opinion; the earliest risks of contestation and manipulation of masses. Really, the invention of printing represented the origin of an ongoing debate characterizing the mediated construction of knowledge and beliefs. This longstanding problem, which is nowadays proposed in a "digitalized" frame, concerns the opposition between the values of authenticity, confidence, social responsibility and the new drifts of sensationalism – the clickbait effect –, conformity and of the "attention economy" (Dornan, 2017). In line with these last perspectives, more people pay attention to a certain topic, more information on that topic will be produced (Ciampaglia, Flammini & Menczer, 2015; Shapiro & Varian, 1999).

Most of what persons know comes through mass media rather than through immediate experience. The WWW has changed the opportunities to be informed and to form opinions (Quattrociocchi, Caldarelli & Scala, 2014), so the efforts to construct citizenship and integrate identities are severely threatened for several reasons, such as the direct and disintermediated production and consumption of contents (Zollo *et al.*, 2015). Compared with the 20th century media and the traditional news, which acted as custodians of the "normality" in public conversations, the Internet granted the release of public expression, with both exhilarating and dismaying effects: when there are no filters and everybody can say what he/she likes, stories can crawl with rancor and venom (Dornan, 2017).

This new environment, lacking public validation, can improve confusion by encouraging speculations and rumors (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009): they can be the source of the

"culture war" and ignorance that post-truth pursues to inspire (Law, 2017). The transition from "a society of facts" to "a society of data" (Davies, 2016) typical of the "post-truth" society, in which public opinion is more influenced by fascinating emotions and subjective beliefs than by objective facts, matches the social media design to anticipate and confirm existing preferences and biases. More "plastic" reality becomes, more difficult is to know what to believe and easier to believe what a person desires to know (Dornan, 2017).

In this background,

"Fake news is an insidious form of post-truth rhetoric, and social media exponentially increases the problems of misinformation and narrow-mindedness. For an ever-growing number of people who get their information online, social media platforms both feed content that viewers already agree with and encourage social grouping, limiting encounters with different ideas that may challenge settled beliefs" (McComiskey, 2017, p. 19).

Defined as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and that can mislead the readers (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017), fake news make explicit the relation between misinformation and narrow-mindedness, which, in turn, testifies the strict connection between a sociological perspective and a more psychological domain.

In fact, the key features of fake news – that is the lack of authenticity and the dishonest intentions – can have both psychological and social foundations (Shu *et al*., 2017). As for the psychological domain, their influential power can be explained by the following main factors:

a) the Naïve Realism that conceives one's own perceptions of reality as accurate and others' ones as irrational and biased (Ward *et al*., 1997);
b) the Confirmation Bias, that is the orientation to select and interpret information consistently with one's system of beliefs, confirming pre-existing views (Nickerson, 1998);
c) the Frequency Heuristic, where people may naturally favor information they hear more frequently;
d) the Illusory Truth Effect, which postulates an increased likelihood of judging a story as accurate in accordance to the familiarity due to prior exposure (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018);
e) the Social Credibility, which makes a source credible if others perceive it so, especially when enough information are not available (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

Both the easiness of creation and distribution and the tendency to consume news on social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Shane, 2017) can catalyze these factors. Furthermore, these cognitive biases are so structured that the formed misperceptions are very hard to be corrected; rather, it seems that true and factual information can even increase the false beliefs, in accordance with the "backfire effect" (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

As for the social sphere, the efficacy of fake news can be explained through:

a) the Prospect Theory, describing choices as based on the perception of gains and losses (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992);

b) the Social Identity Theory and the Normative Influence Theory, emphasizing the need for social acceptance and affirmation as essential for a positive identity development (Tajfel & Turner, 2004);

c) the Echo Chamber Effect, typical of social networks, that is the construction of groups, containing like-minded people, that promote existing narratives and polarized opinions (Del Vicario *et al.*, 2016).

The application of a), b) and c) to fake news implies that also the processes of consuming and disseminating news information act in accordance with the established norms in specific communities as well as with the selective exposure to certain news as appearing in the homepage of one's social media. These phenomena are highly related to more general processes of social homogeneity, confirming their being primary drivers of contents diffusion.

A third axis for explaining fake news comes from the economic game theoretical perspective (Gentzkow, Shapiro & Stone, 2014) assuming two kinds of players having different utilities. In particular, the player "publisher" can strive for: a) a short-term utility, which maximizes profit through the number of consumers; b) a long-term utility, founded on the news authenticity. The player "consumer"'s utility can be based on a) true and unbiased information; b) the satisfaction of psychological utility and social needs. In accordance with this perspective, fake news are successful when the two players respectively and simultaneously place short-term and psychological utility before the other ones (Shu *et al.*, 2017).

2. Fake news as a chance for Discursive Psychology

Alongside the cognitive and social frames, few studies focused on how fake news are discursively constructed. Nonetheless, an underlying assumption is that fake news are written to look like real news. As such, they would fool the readers, since they are not completely capable to check for the reliability of the sources and of the proposed arguments. In a study conducted on three data sets and through features capturing the style and the language of articles, Horne & Adali (2017) have shown that real news articles are more oriented to persuade users through sound arguments. On the contrary, fake news proceed through heuristics, as demonstrated by the high amount of redundancy, the use of proper nouns in titles, more adverbs, fewer nouns, fewer analytic words, and fewer quotes.

However, these factors again concern on low energy, negligence or low cognition of users. This means that previous researches about fake news neglected an essential feature of the pragma-linguistic and social-constructionist perspectives about discourses, focusing on their power to construct reality and knowledge, also through their rhetoric nature. Contemporary rhetoric (Harrienger, 1998) emphasizes the mutual construction of discourse, meaning, and experience: in contrast with the ancient idea that talking just means to transmit ideas, it rather concerns knowledge, institutions, and people themselves as effects of discourse (Berlin & Inkster, 1980).

In particular, overcoming the traditional rhetorical theories, the rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists (Harpine, 2004) claim that "rhetoric creates reality is known as the notion that rhetoric is epistemic, which simply means that rhetoric creates knowledge" (Foss, 1989, p. 122).

In accordance with the main definitions of rhetoric over the centuries, concerning all persuasive communication, including written and nonverbal communication, the practice of rhetoric would be knowledge-producing because we quite must be persuaded of our beliefs (Schiappa *et al*., 2002). More counting definitions emphasize the possibility, acted by rhetoric, of "bringing reason together with passion" (Scott, 2000, 109) as well as, in a more explicit way, the "*description of reality through language*" (Cherwitz & Hikins, 1986, p. 67, emphasis in the original).

Looking this concept through more dialectical lens implies to acknowledge that "through rhetorical interaction, people come to accept some ideas as true and to reject others as false" (Brinton, 1982, p. 158). By contrasting the claims about the objectivity of knowledge, as deriving by direct experiences, this means that "once an idea has been tested thoroughly by a group, community, and society, it becomes part of what these groups take to be knowledge" (Herrick, 1997, p. 22).

If, in accordance with Cherwitz & Hikins, knowledge requires "1) truth, 2) belief, and 3) justification" (1986, p. 21), fake news are founded on rhetoric that produce rumors and construct alternative narratives in relation to those identified by authorities and the mainstream media. Therefore, they act as a source for un-knowledge and misinformation.

3. Rhetoric of anti-politics

Traditional fake news dealing with political matters were mainly expressed through ironic inversions of the day's news (Young, 2006) and, above all, through negative jokes and satirical imitations of politicians' personalities (Hess, 2001). In this domain, social research found that political humor and satirical contents had only limited consequences for real-world policy views (Nir & Mutz, 2010). Nonetheless, increasing studies have demonstrated that even the exposure to these kinds of fake news can not only model viewers' perceptions about the candidates, but also affect essential constructs such as political trust (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Tsfati, Tukachinsky & Peri, 2009) and other political attitudes, including the feelings of inefficacy, alienation and cynicism toward politicians (Balmas, 2014).

These attitudes and feelings can be included in the more general construct of the "anti-politics", whose meanings are as heterogeneous as paradoxical, since it is the increasing expansion of democratic values to be associated with growing distrust and political disaffection (Mete, 2010).

The main definitions of anti-politics deal with either aversion or indifference regarding politics as well as with the undesirable effects of political actions (De Mauro, 2000). Therefore, the core of its criticism addresses to political parties and professional

politicians, since they are accused to be corrupt, inefficient and parasitic, far from the citizens' need and so on. Mete (2010) proposed a taxonomy of four anti-political types distinguishing between "from above" and "from below" phenomena. In the sphere of "from above", anti-politics can be:

a) internal, exemplified by political entrepreneurs, such as populist leaders, which claim to be outsiders to politics. They shout the rhetoric of anti-party criticism and political professionalism, in order to gain popular consensus. As a consequence, these leaders aim to achieve politically prominent roles and then to create a level of popular support, allowing them to rise above the traditional political logic;
b) external, where the target of anti-political rhetoric is the political system as a whole. In this case, the general aim is to reduce its autonomy and importance in favor of other domains, such as the technical, economic or religious ones. The arrogance, the self-referentiality of politics, meant as a profession rather than a public service, and the privileges enjoyed by the members of the political classes, are the main themes of the expressed criticism.

The "*from below*" sphere can be promoted by both 'active' and 'passive' anti-political attitudes, which are characterized by antithetical behaviors: the first ones are active/involved in politics, the second ones are passive/detached and are not politically very knowledgeable.

This scenario is the breeding ground for fake news and their real consequences, at both cognitive and affective levels. Indeed, concerning the emotional dynamics in the actual disintermediated context, in accordance with the echo chamber effect and the other psychosocial factors, the participation to social threads can affect the discussions in the direction that longer they are, more negative will be the sentiment, especially when debates deal with "conspiracy" and political news (Zollo *et al.*, 2015). Really, conspiracy theories make use of narratives reducing the complexity of reality, playing consequently an essential social role in containing the uncertainty and improving a climate of disengagement from mainstream and official informations (Bessi *et al.*, 2015). Thus,

"anger seems to be the motor force of so many of the sites spreading false news for political motives: anger at the political establishment, anger at elites, anger at globalization, anger at immigrants and refugees, anger at the mainstream media" (Dornan, 2017, p. 7).

4. "What would you do in the car with…". The Italian case of Laura Boldrini

In Italy, anti-politics have "greater visibility and more significant implications, in terms of both electoral dynamics and political recruitment" (Mete, 2010, p. 38). In particular, the increase of this phenomenon can be related to both general long-running occurrences – such as the discrepancy between the idealization of democratic values and the negative judgment of the effective functioning of public institutions – and more specific features,

such as the dismantling of the party system and, above all, the political scandals linked to corruption.

Therefore, the Italian context seems to be an appropriate scenario to investigate some features of fake news as related to the political domain.

4.1 Aims and hypothesis

The aim of this work is to analyze the case of a very popular Italian woman, victim of fake news, the last President of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini. From March 2013 to February 2018, she has been the third-highest ranking office of the Republic of Italy, after the President of the Republic and the President of the Senate. In her functions, she foremost both ensured that the Chamber of Deputies correctly functioned and represented the Chamber externally. In addition, as a politically and civilly involved citizen, her main strivings focused on human rights, gender equality, integration and Europe.

During the last years, she has been one of the main victims of severe fake news dealing with her (presumed) family and her political commitment with the abovementioned civic campaigns. Because of several false stories, Laura Boldrini has also been the target of a huge number of *haters*, who were responsible of offenses, insults – such as swear words and wishes for death – and terrible sentences. As an example of this heavy trend, following a horrific news concerning an 18 years old girl's brutal murder, in the first days of February 2018, a fake picture showing her throat slashed was shared on Facebook.

The origin of this persecution is set in the same political domain. On January the 31st 2014, a message was posted on a very popular Italian political leader's Facebook diary: "What would it happen if you would find Laura Boldrini in your car?", provoking an incredible flood of sexist insults. The recalled leader was a very popular Italian comedian who founded a political movement, which was able in some years to join an impressive number of followers, mostly thanks to his being the symbol of the "internal" anti-politics in Italy. Woman, liberticidal, belonging to a rich family, migrants' friends: these are some of the main features getting the (critical) attentions of political and popular assaults across time.

The several widespread news have had a so heavy impact that both social media and TV programs gave an increasing attention to this phenomenon. In addition, after these injuries, she has personally been one of the main promoters of the initiative #bastabufale[1], a ministerial scholar project aimed to improve competences about media literacy as well as to promote pathways to recognize fake news in secondary schools.

In order to analyze some specific features of this case, our research questions are:

a) how are fake news about Laura Boldrini discursively constructed?

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[1] The main objects and documents about #bastabufale (stop with fake news) are available to the website http://www.generazioniconnesse.it/site/it/fake-news/

b) why are they so viral and which levels do they arouse?

In accordance with literature (Shao *et al.*, 2017; Zollo *et al.*, 2015), we hypothesized that the strength of fake news is related not only to the conjunct action of the selective exposure to "echo chamber" and the consequent polarization about political domain, but above all to the call for emotional engagement typical of these texts. We suppose that this "emotional call" can be acted through:

a) specific gradations of the discursive modulation, in the direction of the intensification; b) precise rhetoric epistemic orientations, such us to reveal something that someone deliberately wants to hide.

Secondly, we hypothesized that this social phenomenon can magnify the "spiral of anti-politics" (Mete, 2010, p. 56): in line with the Mete's model, rhetoric in fake news should be more oriented to improve, among its several kinds, the from above external and from below passive dimensions of anti-politics.

4.2 Procedure and interpretative tools

We selected ten fake news about Laura Boldrini among the most widespread ones, as reported by the Italian website www.bufale.net[2]. This is a very interactive and useful website, as it collects users' alerts, verifies the untruth of the stories, boosts the news with tags and highlights the reasons of their fallacy. The selected news have been published and shared from August 2016 to January 2018.

While several researches tried to answer to similar questions through quantitative methods, less proposed are qualitative works, aimed to emphasize the role of discourses in social construction of reality (Gergen, 2001) as well as the importance of the rhetoric nature in the process of knowledge acquisition (Harpine, 2004).

In order to enhance the dynamics of discourses in accordance with what is really at stake – the "*enjeu*" –, the texts have been subjected to a path of Critical Discourse Analysis which we will call "Diatextual" (Mininni & Manuti, 2017), where it is worthwhile firstly highlighting the "genre" of the discourse. In this specific case, fake news are more or less long discursive events, most of time accompanied by images, with a rhetoric and persuasive intent: they act as a privileged channel for disseminating, in incredible brief times and wide proportions, false stories about usually popular persons or social phenomena.

Specifically, our comprehension model responding to the research objectives and to the type of texts is founded on conjoint "bottom-up" and "top-down" pathways. Indeed, since the sense of each discourse does not reside permanently within texts, rather it goes through them as a result of the joint action of the enunciators, it can be caught by answering to three basic questions: Who is saying that? Why does he/she say it? How does he/she say it? These questions organize the interpretative procedures of the SAM

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[2] "Bufala" is the Italian popular name for fake news. More specifically, it stands for "poppycock".

Model (Mininni, Manuti, Scardigno & Rubino, 2014), since they suggest to look for a series of markers which identify Subjectivity, Argumentation, and Modality of discourses. Among Subjectivity, we particularly focused on affectivity markers, which are textual units highlighting the emotional dimension of texts (Caffi & Janney, 1994) by the means of:

a) evaluation markers, which position statements on the axis good/bad, positive/negative, and so on;
b) proximity markers, which metaphorize the emotion through the physic, social, or temporal gap;
c) specificity markers, which modify the reference world (e.g., affective distance can be shown by dealing with specific arguments in a general way);
d) evidentials, which regulate the credibility and the authority of what is said using modals and subjective/objective verbs;
e) volition markers, which modify the self-identification level with respect to partners, for example, through a declarative, interrogative, or imperative tone;
f) quantity markers, which intensify or weaken the meaning of a sentence by the degree of adjectives and adverbs, repetitions, and phonological lengthening.

The top-down pathway has been constructed through the "social-epistemic rhetoric" (Berlin, 1993), a construction that, by incorporating references to both the sociologic analysis of the "ideologies" and the semiotic investigation on "sign systems", permits to catch the sense perspectives valid for specific groups of positioning. In line with the rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists (Harpine, 2004), since it's through rhetorical interactions that people come to know and to accept/refuse some ideas, then the social-epistemic rhetoric can really be a critical and fruitful devise to gain forms of knowledge constructed in online communities.

4.3 Main results

4.3.1 "Tears and blood": the bottom-up pathway

Both public issues – such as migrants, Roma population, Islamic religion – and more private matters – e.g. previous life experiences as well as her relatives' activities – are the main contents of the news in our corpus. Generally, these stories lie in three main ways: a) through the distortion of discourses and events acted by Laura Boldrini; b) through false attributions of identities to the published photos; c) by connecting other Boldrini-named persons to Laura Boldrini's relatives.

As usual in fake-news construction, some **veracity elements** are employed. This tendency is especially acted through the recourse to the "politichese", which is the recourse to the political jargon (e.g. "the new financial plan will made available…"), through the mention of specific and contextualized references (e.g. "she got an assignment at the prestigious Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center di Harvard"), as well as through the more general anchoring to real events, topics and public issues.

On the one side, these features contribute to create a realistic frame and to make the story actual and empirically founded, therefore the readers can lower their defenses. On the other side, they are often accompanied by hints and implicit allusions that work in order to create a climate of suspicion and mistrust.

> Ex. 1: "Less tourism, more rooms in hotels for migrants"

> If the migrants' presence in the cities harms the tourism, this is positive, so there are more free rooms in the hotels for welcoming. It cannot be guaranteed luxury services just for tourists and not for migrants, so if tourists decrease finally it will be possible to rebalance the services.

> Some hoodlums could think that the difference among tourists and migrants is that tourists charge and bring prosperity, but this is an ancient and fascist way of thinking. What is important is the guest's happiness, both a Russian big spender and a poor migrant. For this reason in Italy, we keep the lowest taxes of Europe, because we do not value the almighty dollar[3].

This is the extract of a news, reporting a presumed Laura Boldrini's discourse, based on a real public statement, which is "fake" because it distorts and polarizes the real contents of her words. Alongside with a not perfect syntactic structure as well as with the repetition of some concepts, the discursive construction of fake news has firstly to do with the selection of a **"thick" lexicon**. In particular, in ex. 1 we found:

a) polarized words, recalling extreme positive or negative scenarios ('luxury', 'poor migrant', etc.);
b) connoted words, evoking cultural frames ('fascist', 'Russian big spender', etc.);
c) generalizing words, broadening the domain ('the lowest taxes', 'finally', etc.);
d) common sense words and expressions, taken from the popular saying ('hoodlums', 'almighty dollar', etc.).

These features create an easy activation of the readers' attentions: polarization, connotation, generalization and common sense converge in the simplification of contents, as they are close to both cultural/common life and to the naturally way to articulate contents through oppositions.

This familiar climate and the concurrent emotional commitment are discursively constructed by the means of more or less direct claims for specific social groups too.

> Ex. 2: "Therefore, the Defender of Roma, of refugees, of minorities, also embraces Islam. The will of peace in the world and the efforts to encourage her Country toward fraternal feelings are good and right things, but thinking that the Italians have to conceive the integration, this is another thing".

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[3] All the translations are worked by the authors.

Ex. 3: "This news didn't went over very well for those in "job limbo" and for all the victims of the controversial reform which made all the Italians cry tears and blood".

Across the several articles, we found references to extreme out- and in- groups. In particular, in the ex. 2, specific crowds, which are object of ambivalent attitudes by public opinion, are represented as a whole category, unfairly or excessively defended by Laura Boldrini: the proposed list rhetorically acts as a climax, where "even" Islam is included. As for the excerpt n. 3, dissatisfied social groups are recalled, supported by the rhetoric of euphemism ("didn't went over very well") and by commonsense emotionally charged expressions "tears and blood". Consequently, identification processes are easily activated.

In both examples, **ingroup vs outgroup dynamics** are discursively constructed and emphasized through astute argumentative strategies. Indeed, in 2 we found the "disclaiming" claim that points out the difference between what is "good" and what is "another thing". This strategy makes the argumentation more credible and acceptable, as it acts as a kind of reassurance against any kind of self-blaming thoughts. Therefore, it encourages the subjective adhesion to the proposed position. A similar function is acted by the impersonal expressions 'the Italians': this seeming "*débrayage*" positioning should make both the source more reliable, as it does not seem to be personally involved in the situation, and the situation more objective. Nonetheless, in 3 the "impersonal" recall to the "Italian" belonging is emotively conveyed through, again, common sense and affectively connoted expression, such as 'victims' and 'cry tears and blood', as well as through the repetition of the including adverb 'all'.

These strategies, that promote the simplified opposition between a victimized ingroup and a privileged outgroup, contribute to construct and justify angry and polarized attitudes toward both outgroups and anybody defending them rather than ingroup.

4.3.2 The "conspiracy" plot: The top-down pathway

The top-down process enabled us to individuate some social-epistemic rhetoric that orientate the activation and cultivate the users' feelings. The emerging constellations of sense are constructed through precise argumentative strategies, such as:

a) rhetorical questions, with a clear provoking intention, such as

Ex. 4: "Why not to encourage them to easily steal by letting them adhere to politics?"

b) generalizing premises, aimed to normalize inappropriate behaviors and to offer a "primer" for the reader

Ex. 5: "Laura Boldrini, with her statements, always stirs debates"

c) opposition and contrast, aimed to both simplify reality – white vs black – and to amplify the social gap – poor vs rich.

These strategies act as cognitive tools to create an unambiguous and simplified reality. However, how are the several argumentative strategies combined to construct social-epistemic rhetoric? In order to answer to this question and to better explain in which ways the discursive construction of fake news can improve hate and *haters*, it can be useful to look at these images that were widely disseminated across social network.

Fig. 1 and 2: Two examples of synthetic fake news about presumed Laura Boldrini's relatives, having a huge sharing in social networks.

The texts set of the figures can be translated as follow:

Fig. 1: "She is Luciana Boldrini, younger sister of the President of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini. She manages 340 cooperatives dealing with assistance to migrants but, obviously, nobody talks about this".

Fig. 2: "He is Andrea Boldrini, Laura Boldrini's brother. Her sister got him appointed Executive Director of the Coordination Centre for Districts. He earns 47.000 € per month. No TV news talks about this!!!"

These two images, having the clear format of a presumed "social network scoop", are founded on some similar rhetoric:

a) the "**family affair**", having a great impact on the Italian public opinion, since both in past and actual times as well as at both national and local levels, the revealed favoritisms toward family members represent one of the main source for corruption – not only in the political domain – and for injustice perception;
b) the **political illegality** and maladministration, which proposes the contrast between the "public Good" and the personal interests of a rotten political engagement. As we already emphasized, this rhetoric is at the basis of a profound sense of distrust and anti-politics (Mete, 2010);
c) the "**conspiracy**", that is explicated through the references to a guilty and "obvious" silence, that is claimed as a generalized "code of silence" among TV news and the political power.

Alongside with these common rhetoric, additional constellations of sense are specifically activated for each news:

d) in the first one (fig. 1), the monetary business about the **hosting of migrants** is recalled. The dimension of this presumed "gate" is overreacted by indicating a significant number of the cooperatives (340) that the protagonist should manage;

e) in the second one (fig. 2), the **contrast** between the large amount of the income, related to the presumed high assignment, and the amount of a medium salary. Therefore, the gap between the protagonist's wonderful life and the medium reader's common life is easily evoked.

Even if it doesn't represent our core issue, also the photos work in different directions: in fig. 1, the enigmatic face seems to claim "I got all of you!", whereas in fig. 2 the protagonist, with a bright facial expression and in a luxurious scenario, seems to mockingly toast with the interlocutor.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

Since the World Economic Forum has listed massive digital misinformation as one of the main risks for the modern society, overcoming any enthusiastic rhetoric about collective intelligence (Zollo *et al.*, 2015), several disciplines, from social politics to human computing sciences, are working in order to set this phenomenon and to intervene as effectively as possible. Social discursive psychology can play an essential role in the study of social dynamics implied in fake news. Specifically, it emphasizes the role of each text as a form of social construction of reality and of rhetoric as the main way to describe and propose some ideas as true/false. Therefore, alongside with the relevance of contents and the extraordinary spread of the phenomenon, we believe that an increasing attention should be given to the discursive construction of these news.

The case study we have proposed is a first attempt to improve new kinds of critical reflections and analytical perspectives about fake news. Bottom-up and top-down pathways can converge on the examination of the cognitive and affective activations produced by fake news at both personal and public level. In particular, the bottom-up level enabled us to catch the affective markers, the embrayage/débrayage dynamics and the polarized lexical choices, which work as emotive magnets for public. Through the social epistemic rhetoric, the top-down level revealed the easiness to evoke and confirm some main "faults" dealing with the management of public life, such as corruption and conspiracy. These concepts are founded on the anthropological construct of "amoral familism" (Banfield, 1958) which, in few words, claims the maximization of the material and immediate advantages for the nuclear family, in the general belief that everybody does the same. In the political domain, this means that public offices are considered as "self-empowering weapons": there is a wide gap between ideologies and declared values on the one side and concrete behaviors and attitudes in everyday life on the other side. So, fake news can cultivate these beliefs and social representation traditionally anchored to the Italian background.

In the reported case, further characterizations are specifically set on the "victim", Laura Boldrini, who is the addressee of two main messages:

a) an antithetic (presumed) greater commitment to stranger populations (outgroup) rather than to Italians (ingroup);

b) to not be worthy of such an important political charge for (presumed) previous "light" life and "family-affairs".

The aggravating circumstance is that the entire social system, emblematically represented by mass media, is claimed as working behind people's backs.

Simplification of contents, extreme out- and in-group representations, proposal of dissatisfied social groups as well as ingroup vs outgroup dynamics represent a dangerous mixture of ingredients. The so constructed set of beliefs and affective activations works at both cognitive and emotional levels and concurs to increase the anti-political attitude.

Even if Laura Boldrini's case seems to start through a typical step of "from above" internal anti-politics, the rhetorical construction of fake news can improve more general attitudes of anti-politics. In particular, a) the easy lexicon and low levels of "politichese"; b) the contents close to both subjective and public opinion topics; c) the solicitation and confirmation of personal beliefs about the unclear "halo" surrounding the political world, cultivate negative feelings and attitude toward common people – especially toward "from below" anti-politics. Indeed, fake news can confirm different attitudes and behaviors: disappointment and protest in active anti-political sustainers; disaffection and lower motivations in passive anti-political ones. In both cases, anti-party, contestation and criticism, as well as adhesion to populist leaders and parties find a fertile ground for empowering the "chambers" they are involved in.

If we sum all these features with additional peculiarities from the online presence, the deed is done: the simulation of a trust relation with the enunciator, set as truth-revealing, the dynamics of frustration and the subjective perception of anonymity can increase the aggressiveness (Wallace, 2016) and stimulate haters.

The limitations of this work have firstly to do with the reduced number of the included articles; second, we just analyzed the texts of the news. More news, a wider number of cases and a more pronounced attention to the online answers and reactions to these news can represent a future step in order to better comprehend the relation between fake news and anti-politics. Nonetheless, in finding confirmation to the recent literature about fake news, this work represents a real effort to a deeper comprehension of the possible psycho-social and rhetorical-discursive dynamics behind the processes of distorted construction of reality and of misleading shaping of identity and citizenship.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

All authors have agreed to the submission. The article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal

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