

CHAPTER 8

DEMONIZING FAKE NEWS IN A POST-TRUTH POLITICAL WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Laura Boldrini, president of the lower house of the Italian Parliament, likened fake news (*notizie false*) to edible ‘poison’ that Italians ingested unknowingly. Parliament then announced a plan to implement educational programmes training children to discern real news from fake news. In 2018, Pope Francis, in his ‘Message of His Holiness on World Communications Day’, called the serpent in the tree of life in the Book of Genesis the world’s ‘first fake news’. In 2022, some studies estimate that 17 per cent of Italians encounter fake news every day (Scorza 2022). Why did Italy demonize and quickly mobilize against fake news in the 2010s? In national efforts to patrol fake news, what is the average reader-citizen prompted to do, and, implicitly, value and disregard? In this chapter, I mine the fake news legislation initiatives, guidebooks and policies for what and where they cast the attention and desire of citizens, and what remains hidden and obscured.

Certainly the broadest relevant context is the information age, and, in particular, a cultural and historical context in which scientific knowledge and objective fact have been simultaneously exalted and mystified, and disinformation and conspiracy have been easily and readily disseminated (Molé Liston 2020). Moreover, Italian cynicism regarding news media was reshaped during former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s years of televised masterminding, he himself being the media mogul of companies Mediaset and Mondadori and news publications *Il Giornale* and *Panorama* (Castellano 2020; Molé Liston 2020). In this chapter, I interrogate how media literacy programmes mount a unique moral universe complete with trusted heroes

and fearful antagonists. I theorize the unexpected political effects of sceptical media literacy regimes aiming to transform lazy scrollers into vigilant reader-citizens. And while Italy's efforts to curtail fake news have, unsurprisingly, mostly failed, they represent an opportunity to dissect digital-age citizens' political resocialization under the guise of digital media literacy.

ITALY'S TIMELINE AGAINST FAKE NEWS

As a whole, Italians have a heightened and public sense of politics undergirding news production (Molé Liston 2020). In a system called *lottizzazione*, Italian televised news channels have been divided politically since the 1970s, with each network openly associated with a particular political party. Italian print media is owned by a few powerful families or corporations. Several leading newspapers including *La Repubblica*, the leading paper in the central-south regions, as well as *L'Espresso*, *HuffPost Italia* and *La Stampa*, are controlled by the Agnelli family (Castellano 2020). Meanwhile, the *Corriere della Sera*, the leading paper of Italy's north, is under the control of Rizzoli (RCS Media Group), some of whose owners worked with Berlusconi's company Mediaset (Castellano 2020).

Beginning in the early 2010s, national mobilization, especially at the state level, was aimed at tackling the problem of fake news and disinformation. In 2013, Italy's Fact-Checking Factory (TFCF Srl) was founded and the Communications Regulatory Authority (AGCOM, or *Autorità per le garanzie nelle comunicazioni*) created a Communications Observatory to patrol journalism and online information ('FACTA: Chi Siamo' n.d.; Pasulo 2022). In 2017, the Communications Observatory issued the 'technical table for the guarantee of pluralism and correct information on digital platforms' (Pasulo 2022: 65). In 2017, Law 2688 was proposed to prevent manipulation of online media, guarantee web transparency, incentivize media literacy and punish fake news with fines of up to EUR 5,000 (ibid.: 57). Though a notable attempt to curtail fake news, Law 2688 did not pass because it is neither a civil or penal crime to spread disinformation (ibid.: 62; Candido 2020: 116).¹ In December 2017, Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) senators Luigi Zanda and Rosanna Filippin proposed a law, which also did not pass, focusing on fake news and illicit content on social networks (Pasulo 2022: 65).

In 2018, a special team of experts was formed in the National Centre of Anticrime Information for the Protection of Critical Infrastructures (CNAIPIC) of the Ministry of the Interior, and sponsored a website for reporting fake news to the Postal Police Force (Polizia Postale) (Comandini 2018: 208). The measure, also known as the 'Red Button' plan, was designed

to safeguard the March 2018 elections but was discontinued, due especially to concerns that it had no legal basis (Pasulo 2022: 67). In April 2020, the then undersecretary of the Prime Minister Andre Martella proposed that the government create a monitoring organ for fake news on COVID-19 online and on social networks called the ‘Monitoring Unit to Stop Spreading COVID-19 Fake News Online and on Social Networks’ (Candido 2020: 108, 119). The never-formed group would have representation from the Prime Minister’s office, the Ministry of Health, the Department of Civil Protection and eight government and AGCOM-nominated experts (Pasulo 2022: 69). There have also been recent discussions on how to mobilize around deep-fake videos and apps like FakeYou that distribute easily usable services with which to produce them (Scorza 2022).

In this decade of mobilizations, many of the proposed laws were false starts, failed attempts to try to contain and patrol fake news. The efforts operated on two overlapping fronts: policy and law, and citizen-based education. One could surmise that the subsequent shift towards increasing citizens’ awareness and literacy skills seemed so urgent precisely because of the failure of national law and policy. That said, in the wake of absent legislation, there remains a fairly articulated network of organizations now responsible for producing and regulating fake news. Before I turn to take a closer look at these programmes, I first examine insights from scholarship on fake news.

Anthropologists have examined journalism and fake news (Greenhouse 2019; Storey-Nagy 2021; Özkan 2021; Polleri 2022) with an ethos of caution in terms of unexamined assumptions and premises of both the disciplinary approach and, more broadly, the American political left. Scholars have also tried to overwrite the binary frames of true versus false, free versus censored, in studying fake news. Angelique Haugerud (2018) warns, ‘Today the fake news moniker embodies profound anxieties about the present: science under attack, weaponized information, and possible risks to electoral democracy and national sovereignty for some, or antipathy to liberal elites for others.’ Indeed fake news seems to be symptomatic of deeper problems of democracy, knowledge and science. Adam Hodges offers a capacious framing of fake news as ‘a particular way of participating in a public’ and scrutinizes ‘post-trust’ over ‘post-truth’ (Graan et al. 2020). By ‘post-trust’, Hodges highlights how the core crisis stems from a widespread mistrust in sources of information (ibid.).

Fewer researchers have approached the question of news media literacy, though there are notable exceptions (Hodges 2018). Andrew Graan, for example, frames fake news as ‘the result of professional practices that seek to shape the public circulation of discourse’ (Graan et al. 2020). Jonah Rubin (2021), moreover, examines literacy education efforts in the United States and reveals how ‘varying understandings of democratic governance leads

to remarkably different interpretations of our allegedly singular, objective, factual universe.’ Rubin (*ibid.*: 1) examines how forensic scientists in Spain mobilize a similar epistemological notion of ‘objectively verified facts’ to ‘challenge the foundational arrangements of post-fascist democracy’. Put differently, Rubin shows us the process by which only certain kinds of ‘truth tellers’ become trusted and reliable sources, in ways that rely on often simplified understandings of science. Who becomes a ‘truth teller’ has deep political implications whereby ‘the legitimacy of political participation [is grounded] in the scientific certainty of cold hard facts’ (*ibid.*: 5). Rubin fulfils the demand that Ho and Cavanaugh (2019: 163) lay out in regard to our approach to truth and post-truth that we ‘recognize the extent of the roles [that] faith, authority, and power play in constructing scientific legitimacy’, or, as Karen-Sue Taussig (2019: 1999) puts it, the mandate to ‘illuminate the situated nature of scientific knowledge and the ways it naturalizes power’. In what follows, I track how Italy’s fake news prevention programmes empower only certain kinds of truth tellers, who simultaneously reify both scientific rationality and the notion of truth.

Hesham Shafick (2021: 45) also draws out the nuances of fake news in Egypt by analysing how even fake news considered overtly false might still reshape public discourse, thus dismantling the presumption that ‘corrective information . . . essentially disempowers fake news’. More specifically, he takes up the way that the estimated number of protests in Egypt in 2013, while discredited as fake news, nevertheless ‘enacted the epistemic conditions that facilitated the military coup’ (*ibid.*: 45). Shafick, then, prompts us to ask how the disinformation in circulation might be deeply consequential, rather than whether and how the public judge its truth. Michel Croce and Tommaso Piazza (2021) also scrutinize the epistemological effects of fake news in the broader context of post-truth, that is, one ‘fostered by a lack of concern for the truth – and other epistemically relevant factors – of the shared content’ (*ibid.*: 50). In this way, for Shafick (2021) and Croce and Piazza (2021), the veracity of fake news is beside the point. Studying fake news is more about analysing how a particular epistemological deck gets stacked, a means through which social actors come to know social and political possibilities.

While anthropologists have examined disinformation and media extensively (Boyer 2013; Ho and Cavanaugh 2019; Molé Liston 2020; Rubin 2021; Graan 2022), we also find a new paradoxical tension in studying ‘fake news’ in academe. Carolyn M. Rouse (2019: 172) argues: ‘Sincere liberals get two things wrong: first, that fake news and facts are diametrically opposed, and second, that goals like absolute free speech and or objectivity in journalism are achievable.’ In the context of American Trumpism, David Flood (2019) aptly points out: ‘Poststructuralist arguments about the created-ness of facts

are now weaponized common sense.’ Our sights, Flood argues, should proceed with ‘renewed skepticism of “the media” and focus on the ‘relentless expansion of capitalized digital media’. Like Flood, I highlight how the crisis of fake news is based on the infrastructure of websites – social media and otherwise – that monetize disinformation, first and foremost, but also how it is one effect of a technological system based on algorithmic customization (Comandini 2018; Croce and Piazza 2021; Scarpanti 2021; Shafick 2021; Ruffo and Tambuscio 2022), as well as a highly diminished field of journalism (Haugerud 2018). Prioritizing ‘the epistemic limits of conceivable possibilities,’ I examine the discourse of fake news and attempts to produce fake news literacy, in order to track ‘continuous reproductions of inherited epistemic biases’ (Shafick 2021: 47, 53).

Italian scholars of fake news have focused on legal underpinnings (Maganani 2019; Monti 2019), its psychological trappings (Gili and Maddalena 2018) and literacy practices (Comandini 2021). Domenico Laera et al. (2022: 21) position fake news in Italy as capable of causing ‘damage to society’ and ‘making society collectively victimized’. Moreover, Laera et al. (ibid.: 19) find that users’ experience of heightened emotions, most likely anger, correlates with more shared disinformation, whereas anxious and apprehensive users tend not to share information. Similarly, Croce and Piazza (2021: 50) find that sharing fake news is ultimately fuelled by ‘a hunger for social recognition’. In their analysis of post-truth and fake news, Guido Gili and Giovanni Maddalena (2018: 11–12) argue that most computer users find and share news rooted in a ‘confirmation of their own ideas, opinions, and beliefs’. Thus news that echoes users’ personal values increases their likelihood of both believing and disseminating fake news. Moreover, ‘in-group members’ are likely to see out-group members as vulnerable to disinformation, and hold less scepticism towards materials disseminated by ‘friends’ on their social media accounts (ibid.: 13). As a whole, Italian scholars have been attentive to the affective and psychological mechanisms of fake news circulation.

Laera et al. (2022: 19) argue that the process of sharing fake news hinges on the users’ ‘*perception* of the virtual public’s needs’ (emphasis mine). My work is informed by this model insofar as my attention is captured by how these epistemological circuits – between the user and the online collective sources – rely on perception. But I also imagine ‘perception’ as malleable and culturally and historically particular, shaped by broader public discourses on reading, fake news and the dangers of digital media.

DIGITAL AGE LITERATI: VIGILANT LITERACY AS REMEDY

Perhaps the reason that fake news became nearly synonymous with literacy programmes was because of high rates of functional illiteracy (*analfabeti funzionali*) in Europe and Italy. According to the Institute for Workers' Professional Development (ISFOL, Istituto per lo sviluppo della formazione professionale dei lavoratori), an overwhelming number of Italians are functionally illiterate: over 41 per cent of citizens over the age of 55, 26 per cent of 35–54-year-olds and 20 per cent of young people (aged 16–24) (Grillo 2020). A study by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OCSE) in 2013 positioned Italy as one of the lowest-ranked countries for literacy rates in a multi-country study of literacy and comprehension of online texts (Comandini 2018: 198). In their study of adolescents and fake news, education studies researchers Giuseppa Cappuccio and Giuseppa Campagno (2020) surveyed 290 adolescents (14–17-year-olds) on their critical thinking and their capacity to identify fake news. They found that only 29 per cent verified the source of information they read and 43 per cent did not know how to recognize fake news (ibid.: 229). Interested in literacy as a kind of meta-discursive critical awareness, they argue that users need knowledge and awareness of the 'reasoning system' and the regulating 'criteria' in order to recognize fake news (ibid.: 214). Finally, Andrea Bellavita (2022: 216) agrees that the problem of fake news emerges from an impoverished reading practice whereby most users bear a 'colossal cognitive deficit' due to which they are 'incapable of discerning, comprehending, stabilizing the difference, or even simply recognizing: not only and not just what is true and what is false, but every single semantic and linguistic element that contributes to the construction of texts.' One might presume that the literacy crisis would compel the Italian state to address fake news through legal or technological means, as some scholars have proposed. However, in reality, we find the very opposite pattern: a drive towards resolving the problem of fake news by instituting more elaborate literacy practices.

In 2016, Laura Boldrini, then president of the house, announced a plan for debunking fake news by partnering with leading debunkers and their websites: Paolo Attivissimo (*Il Disinformatico*), Michelangelo Coltelli (BUTAC, or 'Buffaloes: A Lot per Kilo'), David Puente (Davidpuente.it) and Walter Quattrociocchi (Barcellona 2016). She framed the problem as both rights-based, concerning the 'right to be informed correctly', as well as affective: '[Fake news] invent[s] things and never-said phrases to rouse hate' (ibid.). After having been a victim of fake news rhetoric, she proposed a literacy-oriented pedagogy for a projected 4.2 million Italian high school students, captured by her 'decalogue' (*decalogo*) (Scardigno and Mininni 2020: 96):

1. 'Only share news you have verified;
2. Use online instruments to verify the news;
3. Ask about the source and the evidence;
4. Ask for help from an expert or a very competent source;
5. Remember the internet and social network are manipulable;
6. Recognize the various types and styles of fake news;
7. You have enormous power: use it well;
8. Be a good example: don't whine about darkness, just turn on the lights ('Fake News' 2017).

Boldrini's decalogue sets an authoritative tone for a literacy-forward solution to fake news, in which the new generation are fashioned as a kind of digital age literati. The decalogue sets up quite a robust form of reading labour and vigilance, positioned as a moral requirement for all news reading and sharing. In many ways, rational individualism remains at the apex: the singular mind that must 'verify' and reason through information by discerning underlying motives ('manipulable') and genre ('types and styles'). Proper verification relies on smart exploitation of the internet's resources: not only discerning the reliability of evidence but also knowing how to triangulate sources online. Just as television news relied on trusted newscasters, Boldrini's decalogue encourages user-readers to rely on trusted 'experts' if one's own mental resources are lacking.

The digital literati model has been reproduced and further codified among fake news experts like Michelangelo Coltelli, founder of debunking website BUTAC, and collaborator and chief editor (*caporedattrice*) Noemi Urso. For example, Coltelli and Urso's (2019) *Fake News: How to Recognize and Learn How to Recognize Fake News* also encourages attentive readership in media environments. One YouTube book reviewer emphasizes their key intervention: 'Train yourself to reflect, read all the articles with attention, examine the images, sign up for several news sources, and when in doubt, don't "share" news' (Racconti 2019).

Similarly, the Digital Transformation Institute holds that the danger of fake news is 'inversely proportional to the digital literacy of the user' (Gili and Maddalena 2018: 14). Like Boldrini's decalogue, the Digital Transformation Institute offers '10 reflections' on fake news ('Infografica Fake News' n.d.), including:

- 1) Censorship of Fake News is not effective but would be dangerous to users;
- 2) Fake News is a business first of all: the economic dimension is almost always prevalent with respect to the political-conspiratorial dimensions;
- 3) Any mechanism of control must be based on transparent, open and iterative dynamics. It cannot be the responsibility of the platform;
- 4) One rule won't resolve the problem alone. Above all, we need culture, education and knowledge of users.

While the Digital Transformation Institute recognizes the structural underpinnings of fake news (its commodification as a ‘business’), it nevertheless doubles down on the notion that the attentive and educated reader, not the platform or censorship, is the remedy. In her theorization of surveillance society, Shoshanna Zuboff (2021) has proposed taxing data precisely because data-mining allows for fake news to be more successfully and effectively targeted to users. Yet as these fake news programmes illustrate, the ‘reflections’ shift the responsibility to the user-reader and away from the underlying technological mechanisms and infrastructure.

Literacy practices demand the cultivation of discerning reading skills, but also vigilance for intentional deception and malice. Italy’s Communications Regulatory Authority (AGCOM) is a national source promoting media and digital literacy, as evidenced by their ‘D Group’ on literacy, which has a mandate to ‘promote digital and media culture furnishing instruments for citizens for the knowledgeable and critical use of media’ (‘Gruppo D’ n.d.). With the headline ‘Watch out for traps!’ they advise: ‘You must pay attention. . . . It may cause confusion, in the worst cases, risk and danger for society, influencing important choices on matters like health and politics, instigate hate, [or] destroy someone’s reputation’ (ibid.). They advise examining seven parts of a source: checking the URL, author, source, graphic layout and title, verifying the information on search engines and looking for a blue checkmark, which indicates a ‘verification badge’ of a credible profile or webpage (ibid.). In socializing Italy’s user-citizenry towards high-stakes literacy practices, they train emergent readers to be ever defensive: warrior readers in the information jungle, trained to anticipate the fake news ambush.

In Guido Saraceni’s 2018 TEDx talk in Vicenza, ‘Fake News and Post-Truth: A Call to Arms’, the professor of legal philosophy at the University of Teramo encourages user-readers to hone their reading skills, but also reminds them that ‘fake news’ appeals because of its proximity to truth. He offers an example of a site name playing on the name of one of Italy’s leading newspapers – ‘La Repubblica’ rather than ‘La Repubblica’ – in order to entice viewers. The play on the newspaper name, font and spelling makes the fake news more compelling, a signal that the headlines exploit the reliability of adjacent symbols. Saraceni also encourages his audience towards active fact-checking and constant vigilance: reading the URL with attention, staying attentive, practising community responsibility, debunking and reporting fake news (ibid.). In a YouTube video directed at high school and college students, a twenty-something-year-old woman encourages mindfulness: ‘You must always exercise critical thinking’ (‘Fake News: Cosa Sono’ 2020: 4:56). She goes further to encourage user-readers to evaluate the source and the author, ‘cross-reference’ the information by checking other sites (5:11), verify the date, ask experts and ‘check your preconceptions’ (5:22) (ibid.).

Digital literacy is thus fundamentally defensive, and it incites vigilance that is both internal and psychological, as well as external, viewing every source of information as a possible trick. Citing users' regular disregard of warnings on news media, Comandini (2018: 206) argues that fact-checking campaigns 'assume the consumer is rational and willing to be re-educated'. Here, too, digital literacy programmes are based upon a rational subject who morally desires reliable information. Fine-tuning proper reading skills assumes that fake news circulates because the poor reader has been duped. Just as they create ideal and improper digital readers, fake news programmes also create their own origin stories for fake news producers.

DEMONIZING THE FAKE NEWS MAKERS

In this discourse of spotting fake news in Italy, the user is incrementally habituated to consider the malicious intentions of fake news creators. Certainly, a quintessential framing of fake news begins a 'Message of His Holiness on World Communications Day' in which Pope Francis argues:

Yet preventing and identifying the way disinformation works also calls for a profound and careful process of discernment. We need to unmask what could be called the 'snake-tactics' used by those who disguise themselves in order to strike at any time and place. This was the strategy employed by the 'crafty serpent' in the Book of Genesis, who, at the dawn of humanity, created the first fake news (cf. *Gen* 3:1–15), which began the tragic history of human sin, beginning with the first fratricide (cf. *Gen* 4) and issuing in the countless other evils committed against God, neighbour, society and creation. The strategy of this skilled 'Father of Lies' (*Jn* 8:44) is precisely *mimicry*, that sly and dangerous form of seduction that worms its way into the heart with false and alluring arguments. ('Message of His Holiness' 2018)

If fake news is genuinely satanic, the deception of a malevolent actor, then fake news sharers are vulnerable to the 'snake-tactics', but also, like Eve, innocent. Further, Pope Francis argues that fake news makes us victims of 'the deceptive power of evil that moves from one lie to another in order to rob us of our interior freedom' (ibid.). While aligned with defensive digital literacy, the Vatican's rhetoric builds the ultimate metaphor for the devilish creators of fake news as maleficent individuals (Scardigno and Mininni 2020: 82).

The rhetoric of the devilish disinformers extends far beyond the Vatican. In scholarly research, fake news creators are framed as emotionally and psychologically manipulative of their victims: 'In the era of digital information, any fake can take form, feeding on collective fear to be believed and guided towards manipulating consciences' (Cappuccio and Campagno

2020: 216). In their *Democracy and Fake News*, Serena Giusti and Elisa Piras (2021: 4) suggest that fake news and social media are ‘particularly fit for producing subliminal effects that can reach the deepest and most emotional strata of people’s minds’. In both cases, fake news is attributed the power of mind control.

We find a similar pattern in a 2022 video with over 68,000 views by journalist Fabio Duranti. Duranti questions why a televised news programme on TG1 headlined with a story about the Russian bombing of a Ukrainian nuclear site only to reveal that this was fake news (‘Disinformazione di Stato’ 2022). Why, Duranti wonders, would they report on fake news to viewers, as doing so keeps this kind of information in circulation? He elaborates on their possible motives: ‘Everything has a logic. We don’t realize it because we don’t know the techniques used by these social engineers who study the behaviour of our minds for many years. But this is one of the methods to make us believe and digest these things that otherwise, if we reasoned without all of this input, we would come to a totally different understanding, maybe reasoning a bit better’ (ibid.: 1:38–2:16).

Cappuccio and Campagno’s (2020) ‘manipulated consciences’ and Duranti’s ‘social engineers’ are, in some ways, the left-wing, secular version of Pope Francis’s snake, but the objective is shared: fake news preys on the weak for control and domination. Villifying and individualizing news may also be an example of the ‘backfire effect’ whereby fact-checking actually generates greater suspicion and confusion in the public (Ruffo and Tambuscio 2022: 186). Media scholars Rosa Scardigno and Giuseppe Mininni (2020: 86) argue that fake news is ‘founded on rhetoric that produce[s] rumors and construct[s] alternative narratives [and] act[s] as a source for un-knowledge and misinformation.’ As a whole, we find a familiar discursive narrative that channels a collective fear of something invisible into a single individual, a trope present in narratives of witches, body snatchers and zombies. It is hard to discern an enemy in an era of massive shifts: the political manipulation of fact and fiction, information overload, digital media addiction and alienation. So a power-hungry fake news maker becomes the receptacle for these very legitimate anxieties and fears. I now turn to unpacking an adjacent metaphor in the field of Italian fake news that further complicates this seemingly cogent myth of the golden literati versus the dark serpent.

FAKE NEWS AS BUFFALO, DEBUNKERS AS ANTI-BUFFALO

The buffalo’s head, the sloping, wide nose and characteristic curved horns, are crossed by a red slashed circle, the classic symbol of something prohibited. The buffalo (*la bufala*) has become a symbol of fake news in Italy,

and its red strikethrough indicates a space of debunking and fact-checking. The word ‘buffaloes’ (*bufale*) dominates the discourse on fake news (*notizie false*) as a catch-all term for intentionally created lies or false claims, ‘deliberately and knowingly communicated false information’ (‘Bufala’ n.d.; Cappuccio and Campagno 2020: 220). The term appears to veer closer to the English term ‘hoax’ as it implies intentionality in the fake news, and it is occasionally used alongside the more literal term ‘fake news’, which is often used in English, or in Italian as ‘false notizie’ (‘FACTA: Chi Siamo’ n.d.).² One website graphic on the Wikipedia page for buffaloes shows a spectrum labelled ‘Types of False Information’, running from the left, ‘Disinformation (Lies meant to confuse)’ to the right, ‘Misinformation (Errors made in good faith)’. Buffaloes are positioned in the centre and captioned: ‘Deliberately created lies masked as truth’ (‘Bufala’ n.d.).

‘Buffaloes’, therefore, is often used interchangeably with misinformation broadly, and fake news specifically (Damiani 2004; Grillo 2015; Scarpanti 2018). In 2016, Boldrini promoted leading debunkers as ‘unmasking the buffaloes’ (Barcellona 2016). Similarly, many websites identify fact-checking as anti-buffalo, such as the Antibufala group page on Facebook, as well as Hoax.it with its tagline ‘Stop the Buffaloes’ (*Stop alle Bufale*), Butac.it with the motto ‘Buffaloes: A lot per kilo’ (*Bufale un tanto al chilo*), Bufale.net, and Bufaleedintorni.it, or ‘Buffaloes and surroundings’ (*Bufale e dintorni*), with the motto ‘Spreading buffaloes is useless, irrational, and in some cases, dangerous’ (Scarpanti 2018: 14). Taken together, the metaphor of fake news as buffaloes and debunkers as anti-buffalo (*antibufale*) represents a fake news in which the news-believer or sharer becomes a victim of malicious trickery, domesticated and led by the horns by the domesticating fooler. The term ‘buffaloes’ has become code for malicious and deliberate disinformation, so it also relies on the figure of an evil producer.

Edoardo Scarpanti’s (2018) *Buffaloes: Post-Truth, Language and Fascination with Fake Stories on the Web* refers to fake news (*la bufala*) as ‘post-truth’s favourite child’, and ‘an expired product, definitely spoiled and most of the time even toxic’ (ibid.: 10). The related agent here is the ‘fake news spreader’ (*bufalario*) who ‘deliberately spreads fake news –well aware of its complete unreliability – with the goal of gaining personal benefit’ (ibid.). The gain to the *bufalario*, he contends, might be economic, based on deceptively diverted clicks, or political, reshaping views or undermining people, beliefs or practices, especially as a way to ‘stimulate hate’ (ibid.: 13). Ultimately, the buffalo-fake news metaphor circulates a similar narrative of the innocent duped versus the vile duper. And, whether bovine or Biblical, the malicious disinformers has an implied saviour: the debunkers.

HEROIZING THE FACT-CHECKERS

Whether literacy or buffalo-based, fake news information situates a clear mandate for user-readers to refer to debunkers as information gurus. FACTA, with its tagline ‘Choose whom not to believe’, is a debunking website, targeting fake news and its dissemination in Italy, launched in March 2020 (‘FACTA: Chi Siamo’ n.d.). FACTA belongs to Italy’s The Fact-Checking Factory (TFCF Srl) and the International Fact-Checking Network (ibid.). TFCF, founded in 2013 and originally called Pagella Politica Srls, was originally a political watchdog website. While Pagella Politica (n.d.) fact-checks Italy’s political world, FACTA is dedicated to any kind of disinformation. The International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter was established in 2015 to ‘enable fact-checkers through networking, capacity building, and collaboration’ (‘IFCN: Empowering’ n.d.). Naturally, the FACTA website invites users to report ‘suspect news’ by WhatsApp, QR code-enabled private chat function or email (‘FACTA: Segnalazioni’ n.d.). Fact-checkers and debunkers are emergent new figures in this landscape and frame their work as transparent, politically engaged, global and moral.

Paolo Attivissimo, a self-defined ‘information technology journalist and buffalo catcher’ and author of the guidebook *How to Be an Anti-Buffalo Detective (Come Diventare Detective AntiBufala)*, is an iconic example of the heroic debunker (Attivissimo n.d.). He ran a course via the Italian Committee for the Control of Pseudoscientific Affirmations (CICAP) in April 2022 with the tagline: ‘Even you can be an anti-buffalo detective!’ (‘Anche tu detective’ 2022). One of his YouTube videos, ‘True or False? The Truth Crisis in the Age of Digital Media’, which boasts only a meagre 6,553 views, allows him to embody the persona of the ultimate literate media reader and decrier of fake news (Attivissimo 2018). Attivissimo (ibid.) instructs viewers that the underlying system of internet advertising encourages the creation of fake news by monetizing it. Yet this oeuvre of deception allows for a kind of capitalist technique in becoming a debunker who still relies on monetized views and clicks.

So, here, too, the story ends as one might anticipate: bad individuals beget the need for good ones. The calls for critical literacy, the moral warnings of ‘snake-tactics’, the playful ‘no buffalo’ memes condition the desire for a clear-headed, rational individual. It is not, furthermore, particularly surprising that many famed debunkers, like Attivissimo, the Venezuelan-born Davide Puente, raised in Italy, BUTAC founder Michelangelo Coltelli and Sapienza University of Rome researcher Walter Quattrociocchi, are white men. In fact, the top-tier expert readers in the digital age replicate the social structures familiar from newscasters of the television and radio age (Scardigno and Mininni 2020: 83). In other words, the technological form of

information may change, but citizens must still defer to a small, elite group of proper information gatekeepers: the powerful white men become key epistemological labourers in the digital age.

MIRRORED WINDOW READERS

The anti-fake news mobilization has yet to produce sceptical literacy-savvy citizens, and more vitally, keeps public gaze off the algorithmic infrastructure of filter bubbles that undergirds fake news (Pariser 2011; Bozdog 2013; Ruffo and Tambuscio 2022). Put differently, the technological infrastructure of algorithmic silo-ification and data-sharing remains in the shadows. Citizen-users' digital media consumption is largely structured by customization algorithms, that is, their demographics, past likes, Google searches and Gmail keywords, thus mirroring back to the user a view of the world pre-aligned with their preferences. The citizen-user experiences their digital consumption as outward-looking, as if it were a window onto online knowledge and free-flowing information. Yet, in actuality, the information they consume is more like a mirror than a window, reflecting their own idiosyncratic preferences, beliefs and views back to them in what I have called a mirrored window world (Molé Liston 2020). As fake news becomes tied to malevolent actors with insidious motives, citizens are primed to hunt for maligned actors when, in fact, they fail to scrutinize their 'friends' as demonic fake news spreaders. Moreover, their very social media feeds have already been algorithmically tailored to show the 'friends' and content already aligned with their political ideologies and beliefs. Indeed, online customization augments the confirmation bias effect whereby users are already primed to agree with materials engaged with (Ruffo and Tambuscio 2022: 185; Bellavita 2022: 214).

Gili and Maddalena (2018: 14) conclude their study of media literacy with a concept that echoes the mirrored window world: 'It is long notable that the isolation of the individual is the principal factor that renders one vulnerable to manipulative influences and projects.' Indeed, what results, they argue, is a 'naked society' (*società nuda*), a 'mass of individuals deprived of significant relationships among them' (ibid.). In a metaphor that predates the actual 'lockdowns' of COVID-19 in which genuine physical silo-ification materialized, the 'naked society' finds vulnerable individuals digitally and physically alone, unprotected against harmful influences. In both cases, isolation, whether sociopolitical isolation or algorithmically customized bubbles, characterizes the digital media world.

In a digital world with increasingly isolated citizens, why do so many media plans treat social actors as if truth is their ideal? For many scholars,

these atomized citizens are beginning to lose trust in people, institutions and even a notion of reliable truth. Summarizing key insights of post-truth politics, Giusti and Piras (2021: 5) suggest that ‘people are inclined to accept arguments based on their own consonance to their own emotions and beliefs rather than based on facts’ (see also Scardigno and Mininni 2020: 83). Croce and Piazza (2021: 56) propose that fake news actually ‘fosters our disinterestedness [*sic*] in the truth’. Hodges argues that a ‘baseline level of trust is missing’, that is, trust in public institutions, science or, more broadly, reliable sources of information (Graan et al. 2020). Similarly, Federica Merenda (2021: 27) suggests that ‘we lose trust in each other as epistemic sources’; this is a trust dip that might be exacerbated among specialists, something Vincent Ialenti (2020: 6) calls a ‘deflation of expertise’. Scrutinizing sources and vigilance over content becomes so laborious that users are actually coaxed into becoming less discerning and less trusting of any information or person not already aligned with their digital doppelganger. The complex demands on the digital reader may, in fact, produce apathetic disengagement and distrust. What is more, the media regime incites citizens’ desires for emotionally salient messaging with clear, not opaque, messages.

POST-TRUTH POLITICS: FROM ZOMBIES TO MELONS

Renowned left-wing journalist Marco Travaglio quipped that Italy was the ‘cradle and homeland’ of post-truth ‘at least 22 years thanks to Mr. B[erlusconi] who camped out undisturbed from 1994 to 2011’ (Orecchia and Preatoni 2022: 11). Masterminding print and television media like political clay to mould his career, Silvio Berlusconi was exceptionally capable of fashioning a brand for himself as a political outsider, garnering public trust as he ushered through his right-wing neoliberalizing policies in the early 2000s. Beppe Grillo, on the other hand, comedian-cum-politician and founder of the centre-left populist Five Star Movement, reshaped the Italian political landscape in the late 2000s and through the 2010s (Molé Liston 2020). In order to galvanize faith in digital media, upon which his emerging populist movement was based, Grillo positioned print and televised media as the cancer of Berlusconi governance, instead glorifying internet-based media as grassroots democracy: information for all.

Grillo had coined the term ‘ItaloZombie’ to represent the Italian citizen braindead from deceptive news and information; the ItaloZombie was ‘the metastasizing of the Country and free information is the cure’ (Grillo 2010). Foundational to the populism of the Five Star Movement were web-based communications and a vision of grassroots direct democracy, in addition to a populist vision distrustful of institutions, including the European Union,

and political insiders (Angelucci and Vittori 2021). Thus, Grillo's ItaloZombie was actually quite a pointed critique of the Berlusconi telenews media empire in which the remedy of 'free information' was structural, not individualized. The Five Star populist movement disseminated a clear message: online communication and information could collectively liberate Italians from the prison of party-driven television media. Grillo, naturally, framed the Five Star Movement's entrenchment in web-based communications as uniquely able to de-zombify the television-fed citizenry (Grillo 2020a).

In a relatively short period, Berlusconi's TV zombies and Grillo's utopian vision of the internet as democratized liberator were followed by Giorgia Meloni's September 2022 election win for the right-wing Brothers of Italy party (Fratelli d'Italia or FDL) (Chiaramonte et al. 2023).³ The Brothers of Italy's 'normalisation and mainstreaming of nativist ideas' began in Berlusconi's first decade on the political scene, particularly in two parties' inclusion in his coalition: the neofascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) and the then right-wing Northern League (LN, now redubbed just 'the League') (Zulianello 2022: 21). In fact, Meloni was active in MSI's youth organizations as a teenager. For example, she organized the 'Atreju' festival, with nods to fantasy culture and Nordic mythology, as a kind of white fascist nostalgia and mythology (Baldini et al. 2023: 7).⁴ The MSI slowly shifted from a conservative right-wing party to the populist radical right FDL, whose 'Italy-first' ideology promotes nativism, economic protectionism, euroscepticism, increasing regional autonomy and conservative, anti-LGBTQIA social policies (Zulianello 2022: 22–23; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2023: 3; Baldini et al. 2023: 1, 14; Puleo and Piccolino 2022: 12–14).

In addition to providing Italy's first ever female Prime Minister, Meloni's win represented one of the lowest voter turnouts in Italian republican history, but also the greatest parliamentary majority of any coalition since Berlusconi's 1994 Go Italy (Forza Italy) win (Chiaramonte et al. 2023: 2).⁵ While 'il Presidente' (Mr President) Meloni and FDL members deny fascist ties, their party adopts neofascist iconography such as the tricolour flame logo of the MSI (Zulianello 2022: 22). Many scholars argue that they have 'ideologically rebrand[ed]' to embody the populist radical right (Baldini et al. 2023: 16; Puleo and Piccolino 2022: 21). In many ways, the populism of Grillo's Five Star Movement was based on a democratization of media literacy and online engagement, while Meloni's right-wing populism benefits from certain failures of Grillo's techno-populism. It is as if the television-based disease poisoning Grillo's 'ItaloZombies' has mutated to an algorithm-controlled social media disease, where the mind-numbing effects on consumer-citizens persist.

In 2022, *La Repubblica* declared that Meloni had 'won' social media, estimating that she had climbed from 42 per cent in 2021 to 91 per cent of

performance and owed this to a ‘transformation in communication: more institutional and informative’ (Sangermano 2022). *Il Tempo* characterizes her social media style as ‘informal language, occasionally aggressive, profoundly explicit, and not at all conventional’ (Giordano 2022). Baldini et al. (2023: 7, 9) credit her ‘successful populist style of communication’, including her well-crafted viral and ‘memefied’ messages (see also Ventura 2022).⁶ Accordingly, with social media central to Meloni’s strategy, debunking website Bufale.net have had their hands full with debunking posts about Meloni. Fake news stories about Meloni include her picture with Mussolini framed in the background (Mastinu 2021) or wearing a masonic pendant (‘Giorgia Meloni col Ciondolo Massonico’ 2022). Yet even the ‘buffaloes’ keep her in circulation.

At times, Meloni has ignited polemics and high Twitter view counts, for example by reposting a video of a rape that occurred in Piacenza in August 2022 (‘Meloni Posta’ 2022). A Ukrainian woman was raped by an asylum-seeking man from Guinea; the crime tapped into Meloni’s xenophobic and heavily anti-immigrant policy plans. In her post, she added the words: ‘I will do everything possible to give back safety to our cities’ (ibid.). When criticized, especially regarding the ways that the video disrespected the privacy of the victim, she retorted: ‘I’m ashamed of political leaders using a rape to attack me’ and ‘I won’t stand for Enrico Letta [leader of the Democratic Party] spreading lies about me and using this most terrible rape in Piacenza for the purposes of sinister propaganda’ (ibid.). Meloni repositioned sexual violence as something that male politicians were audacious to ‘use’ against her, skilfully casting attention away from her own ‘use’ of the video to incite anti-immigrant outrage. In a viral video on the eve of the election, she garnered 5.3 million views for her TikTok in which she held up two melons and said: ‘September 25. I have said it all’ (Abraham 2022). The joke played on her name, Meloni, which means ‘melons’, and the double entendre of ‘melons’ as a slang term for breasts. Meloni’s rhetoric is simultaneously coy yet elementary: people don’t need lofty literacy skills to get a boob joke. Finally, she exhibited no hesitation in suing famed anti-mafia critic and filmmaker Roberto Saviano for defamation for calling her a ‘bastard’ regarding her response to shipwrecked migrants’ suffering and death (Poggioli 2022). Just as Berlusconi did, Meloni mounts a mediatized political regime in which defamation suits flex her legal muscle in the hopes of silencing or, in some cases, overtly censoring critics.

What we might notice here is how the ‘informative’ and ‘profoundly explicit’ language of Meloni performs affective immediacy: it is political language that obviates the rhetorical scrutiny demanded in fake news prevention (Sangermano 2022; Giordano 2022). The language of Meloni’s newly successful right-wing populism arrives as an antidote – visually rich,

provocative and salacious content – to the information fatigue of the average Italian citizen. Weary screen-readers, asked to be hypervigilant towards all digital information, are simultaneously moulded to desire ‘explicit’ media. After all, the very nature of ‘explicit’ discourse implies the suspension of doubt: Meloni’s power, and that of her authoritarian seduction, lies in satisfying the citizen-user’s desire to escape ambiguity.

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NOTES

1. Pasulo (2022: 62) explains that disinformation is only a crime when it is meant to harm or create a disadvantage for others.
2. There are several theories on the etymology of this usage of buffalo: (1) the idiomatic phrase ‘lead by the nose like a buffalo’; (2) Roman dialect, in which ‘bufala’ means rude, and later, referencing bad cinema, represents a ‘rip-off’ (*fregatura*); (3) a seventeenth-century Sienese or Florentine festival of the ‘bufalata’ or running of the buffalo in which butchers often deceptively sold buffalo meat as beef; and (4) a risky fishing practice known as ‘buffalo fishing’ (*pescare a bufala*) in which a sailboat unifies its sails into a single one (‘Bufala’ n.d.).
3. Even though Giuseppe Conte of the Five Star Movement has served as Prime Minister twice since 2018, the party has become fractured and precipitously declined since Conte’s replacement by Mario Draghi in 2021 (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2023: 5).
4. Atreju is the name of the protagonist of the 1984 fantasy film *The NeverEnding Story*. The Atreju festival has since become a more adult-oriented event with visitors including Steve Bannon in 2018 and Viktor Orban in 2019 (Baldini et al. 2023: 7). MSI has also borrowed from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, including ‘Hobbit camps’ for MSI youth (ibid.).
5. A few scholars, however, suggest that Meloni should not be defined as populist as opposed to ‘nationalist [and] sovereigntist’ (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2023: 17).
6. Meloni gave a groundbreaking speech in October 2019 that included the words: ‘I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian, and no one is going to take this away from me!’ After the clip went viral, DJ Mem and DJ J created a rap from her speech. The refrain was also featured in her 2021 autobiography *Io Sono Giorgia*.

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