

NEW TRENDS IN MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE. THE RISE OF KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIAL RESILIENCE

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Abstract

Digitalization of the information environment and growing complexity of the new media ecosystems have enabled the use of new technologies for spreading fake news, malicious or partisan content and hostile narratives. At the same time, these trends, visible within media, communication and culture, have been accentuated by characteristics of the digital arena. The present paper gives a brief insight into some of the key evolutions triggered by digitalization upon contemporary societies, addressing topics such as the use of fake-news in accentuating social polarization and cultural divides, communication hijacking as well as the role of knowledge-based social resilience in maintaining democratic balance.

Keywords: mass-media, communication, culture, hybrid threats, soft power, social resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary world is strongly influenced by the presence of a set of interconnected phenomena, which tend to challenge the perception, the identities and the traditional functions of the media systems. In this context, some of the key trends which shape media, communication and culture include: deterritorialization and diasporization of social identities, fragmentation of the setting agendas and growing influence of media bubbles and digital echo chambers, decline of textual communication and rise of visual and hyper-interactive media content, commodification of news, accentuated by the growing power of social networks. The present paper explores the perspectives of evolution of contemporary media systems and media culture within the bounds of new digital arenas, the main research hypothesis referring to the presence of an essential narrative stake of mediated messages, the diversification of stakeholders that are active within information ecosystems requiring new strategies for building societal resilience.

II. THE RISE AND DOWNFALL OF NETWORK SOCIETIES

Digitalization have triggered tremendous changes within contemporary world. Therefore, it is difficult to estimate the effects, the magnitude and the long-term evolution prospects of this technological and cultural revolution. The emergence of network societies was discussed by sociologist Manuel Castells in the early stages of digital transformation (Castells 2011), the main characteristic of the connected societies referring to acceleration of globalization, under auspices of virtualization of markets and rise of informational economy, fragmentation of the media systems and the end of mass audiences, due to growing potential of interactive communication chains. Published in 1996, Castells's book, *The Rise of the Network Society*, predicts the end of the Gutenberg era, new media models engaging the viewer in new interpretative and meaning creating processes. Prior, Marshall McLuhan considered that visual communication media, like television, tend to involve the public emotionally, due to the metaphorical nature of the image, the receptors being invited to fill the gaps of the message with their own intuitions and representations (McLuhan 1962: 77).

As a global communication medium, television was seen as a pervasive and powerful presence, able to shape group identities, to instill cultural landmarks and to support transnational cultural and political movements. Television was used as soft power tool within various political settings, including the Arab Springs of the 60s and 70s or the anti-Soviet propaganda of the late 80s, demonstrating the power of visual media in influencing international relations and local politics. Collective interpretation of media apparently supports collective political

action. However, the process of meaning attribution remains dependent by audiences' cultural codes, stereotypes and dormant affinities, mostly originating in historical vestiges, class culture or invented traditions. Castells also invoked Umberto Eco's perspective upon role of socio-cultural circumstances in creating a variety of codes (Deleuze and Guattari: 2018), rather than creating fixed rules of interpretation of messages.

Nevertheless, television was a cool communication medium, using the one-way communication model. In this context, the Internet revolution offered an interesting hyperbola of the image-based communication culture. However, the digital mutation enabled a set of influential and interrelated phenomena.

Digitalization not only multiplied the cultural codes and semiotic frames available for various groups and communities in interpreting the message, but also opened the possibility for continuous negotiations of social meanings and cultural landmarks. Digitalization accelerated the globalization process but determined subsidiary trends such as deterritorialization and diasporization. The global village metaphor was thus replaced by the image of rhizomic media structures, analogous to what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari described as new forms of information cities and interactive urban life. In time, digitalization of mass-media systems enabled a diversification of actors engaged in creation and circulation of news. Also, digitalization stimulated a fragmentation of setting agendas worldwide, influenced by algorithmic rules and nourishing the rise of parallel public spheres.

Nowadays we witness the advent of non-state power actors in international relations, the diversification of publics and segmentation of media systems and the emergence of a global rhetorical arena. At the same time, digitalization opened the road for empowerment of users, transforming them into receptors and creators of message, the block-chain society replacing the initial model of network society. However, decentralization, autonomy and circular memory of the new digital culture nourished unexpected consequences. In the context of digital transformation, the communication universe became gradually more divided and segregated than before. Published more than two decades after Manuel Castells' seminal book, Felix Stalder's work, *The digital condition* (Stalder 2018), highlighted some of the critical trends of the new communication culture: exponential expansion of the information sphere; growing complexity of media architectures; combination of user-centric platforms with centralized, traditional media actors; critical role played by algorithms in designing information high-ways.

The digital condition was defined in terms of referentiality, communal meaning-making, automation and algorithmizing and, mostly, in terms of information overpowering volume. Referentiality implies recovery of cultural meanings by reinterpreting and mixing existing content, such as media representations, myths, social rituals and traditions or even social mythologies and basic structures of the social imaginary. At the same time, referentiality requires the reconfiguration of the symbolic and semiotic dimensions of mass-communication, using two major techniques. First of all, referentiality creates a false memory loop, the new remixed content being perceived as already familiar, according to an imprecise and intuitive recognition, and, secondly, referentiality recovers strong cultural codes, using them as justification for promoting current political and ideological agendas. The false memory loop often generates false legitimation, resulting in building flawed majorities, social polarization and even in rediscovery of illiberal affinities. The rise of authoritarian, traditionalistic or nativist political discourses in Europe and overseas could be linked to digital referentiality effects. In this context, malign actors or opportunistic political players employ the power of invented traditions to reclaim visibility and media power. Referentiality ability to recirculate and renegotiate complex cultural codes determines subsidiary effects, such as social polarization, partisan reception and interpretation of news, as well as ingravescence of representational divides.

The multiplication of media flows slowly determined a decline of mainstream setting agenda, nourishing parallel information hierarchies. Audiences often fail to share basic information interests, individual consumption patterns determining heterogeneity and accentuating commodification and weaponization of media content. The multiplication of cultural divides became traceable in electoral distortions, civic disengagement and in the decline of common social interest. Paradoxically, communality, another effect highlighted by Stalder's work, refers to the process of permanent negotiation of social meanings (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Communality implies the collective work of publics, media and politics in creating meaning and value for community of practice, social rituals and even social order and logic. Classical concepts such as state, democracy or truth become fluid and their meaning is constantly rebuilt under pressure of this permanent dialogue. The concept of rhetorical arena was coined by Timothy Coombs in early '90 (Schwarz, Seeger and Auer 2016), but perhaps the true explicative vocation of the term is visible in the present. The polyphony of public discourses and the growing power of hyper-interactive media may question the initial prospects of the network society. The network society disclosed the image of a fragmented modernity in spite of the fact that, at the beginnings, it was seen as a space of cooperation and participation.

In many cases, digitalization determined complicated political successions, reinforcement of ethnic, religious or cultural divides or democratic inversion and relapse of post-colonial or post-communist societies. At the same time, algorithmizing, another influential feature of the new digital universe, creates new vulnerabilities within media systems. Effects such as the illusory majorities, which are based on false accounts, trolls farms and malign influence, the decline of media accountability and the distortions of news' sources, and the appropriation

of digital communications space, announced the rise of hybrid threats. Felix Stalder's book presents the effects of the complex cultural and structural transformations triggered by the end of Gutenberg era, among which mention can be made of the concentration of power and the rise of post-state political and economic forces, the widening of political participation mostly under formula of a Green Uprising (Huntington 1965) and the threat of Knowledge monopolies, enforced by new technological hegemons.

III. MEDIA, POWER AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE UNDER SIEGE OF HYBRID THREATS

Current diversification of the communication arena opened the door for a malign turnover of the user revolution, weakening the power of the traditional media Gatekeepers. In most cases, appropriation of digital space was difficult to counteract, because of malign players's ability to hijack the trends, to spin the digital agenda and to employ the new toolbox of hybrid tactics. Initially, the term of hybrid war was used in connection with unconventional warfare, employing a large variety of tactics, from political warfare, fake news and narrative operations to cyberwarfare and electoral interventions. Promoted by Frank Hoffman's work upon Israel–Hezbollah conflict which was defined by blended tactics, hybrid war gained new connotation in the context of Russia's first stage intervention in Ukraine, in 2014. At the time NATO Heads of State issued a statement that included the term in connection with Russia's grey flag operations. The concept of hybrid war has evolved since then, gaining new meanings as the use of mass-communication for propaganda, fake news dissemination, accentuation of social polarization and social divide (NATO 2024). At the same time, the new context of digital communication accentuated the changes occurred in international environment, the threats to national security becoming more fluid and more diverse (NATO 2020). Traditional boundaries amid war, peace or crisis were no longer valid, the main beneficiaries of the digitalization disruptive effects being authoritarian regimes, malign non-state and post-state actors, economic lobbies and new security challengers. These actors employed a large variety of tactics and non-traditional means, often without being detected and imitating the discursive pattern and cultural semiotics of traditional and local players. The referentiality condition mentioned by Stadler in his essay supported the recovery and recirculation of narratives and representational stereotypes. In this context, people make decisions mostly based on their cognitive biases, social experience and basic cultural conditioning. Their worldviews and meaning of events depend on the information environment, the new visual syntax of digital media and digital communication requiring new interpretative solutions.

Digitalization not only involved the rise of media bubbles and the multiplication of media agendas but also inaugurated a phase of image-oriented content. The shifting of media consumption to mobile devices shaped the patterns of digital communication, the smaller screens and the aggregating force of social media forcing the decline of the text. The post-Gutenberg tournament of communication generated interesting effects, the visual content involving new interpretative tools. First, image itself doesn't hold a unique interpretative code, its meaning being constructed in relation to the viewer. Secondly, the image-base content tends to be easier to adapt to newer contexts, avoiding the cognitive bias of the viewer. Thus, a visual media culture favored a metaphorical interpretation of advertising and news. At the same time, the interdependencies arisen amid visual oriented media and recent hybrid threats required new theoretical instruments, targeting the metaphorical nature of the new communication universe. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, established scholars in field of cognitive linguistics, highlighted the interdependencies arising amid one person's worldview and his/her perception of truth (Althus and Haiden 2018).

Under these circumstances, understanding of the situation is a priori shaped by a combination of beliefs, social conventions and political and mediatic echoes surrounding the topic. Lakoff and Johnson consider that news-bites, key words and strong images are forgotten rapidly, but individuals still hold the "edifices of shared meaning", constructed through imagery and metaphor. These strong group representations emerge because of both referentially and communality. However, the real power of such edifices of shared knowledge lays in their ability to act as an exclusionary force. Even when the mainstream media can offer evidence-based arguments against a political offer or a social message, the public may reject these claims, because they contradict their image of the world. The exclusionary character of the edifices of shared knowledge challenges the equilibrium of participatory democracies, since their ability to perpetually reinterpret the facts is supported by the very specificity of the digital media and culture. Exclusionary communication was connected to relevant trends such as post-truth politics, ascent of populism or decrease of social resilience and democratic accountability (Olsen 2013). Post-truth definition, concept launched during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, targeted aspects such as denoting

circumstances and promoting interpretations, case in which objective facts are less important than the political belief and the viewer's emotional engagement.

The intersection of post-truth, populism and fake-news concerns mostly the tendency to emphasize personal translation of facts and the definition of the truth above the rational and factual truth. This capacity to segregate the individual perception from the general one opens the road for a complex set of communication and media distortions that affect contemporary societies. To name only a few, the effects of exclusionary communication, combined with new characteristics of the information space could include: an international communication arena defined by uncertainty and ambiguity, an ascent of ideological thin actors, using populist and nativist discourses, a diversification of stakeholders active within information ecosystems and some evolving tactics of malign influence.

At the same time, the instrumentalization of conflicts, which are based on competing narratives, influence and hybrid informational threats, demonstrates that cyberwar and international influence operations are gradually shifting toward discrete strategies such as the creation of false social-media movements and communities, the false flag recruitment of influencers and the communication hijacking (Hautala, Luoma-aho and Brown 2025). By spinning the trends, dark strategic communication, which is employed by state and non-state actors, may affect the democratic balance of the liberal societies, may develop long-term social polarization and may undermine public trust and limit the efficiency of state, institutions and leadership.

Nowadays digital public spheres are often defined by polarization, simplified identity-narratives, use of basic group mythology and reinforcement of symbolic social cleavages. In this context, social resilience of liberal societies may become a quantifier for measuring a state's stability and international relevance within security pacts. Communication culture became critical for conserving societal consensus and democracy models, hybrid treats having the power to destabilize public arenas, affecting discourses, institutions and civic dynamic. International power actors such as NATO, define social resilience as a society's ability to resist, recover and counteract in the context of hostile actions or non-intentional crises (NATO 2022). Major shocks such as health crisis, electoral distortions or social polarization could measure both civil and societal preparedness in front of hybrid and non-conventional threats, national resilience also including civil society. Citizens' trust in institutions, democratic practices and politics define essential conditions of social resilience. However, disinformation, propaganda and hostile narratives determine more complex threats in contested territories, the proximity of the Ukrainian conflict creating subsidiary vulnerabilities at the Eastern border of NATO's security pact. The civilizational continents theory described by Huntington's influential essay in mid-90 (Huntington 1996) argued that future wars would be fought not between states and countries, but between cultures. Trends as referentiality and communality accentuated many of the cultural stereotypes and reinforced relevant group narratives, the revival of nativist, millennial and populist speech in local politics being a discrete symptom of the digital condition. Moreover, when hostile forces, proxies and long-term hegemony use cultural codes, iconography of power and media semiotics that are perceived by target societies as authentic, their effects and echoes become extremely difficult to counteract.

By spinning the trends, hijacking the meaning of news and controlling the digital discourses, malign forces could engage in long term influence operations. Moreover, the audiences are attracted in a collaborative interpretation game, the edifices of shared meaning acting as selection filters for partisan content. Perpetuation of hostile narratives often escape states and civil society reactions, rejecting facts-based arguments. Audiences' implication in the continuous adaptation of the stories contributes to the fact that they are perceived as authentic. A strong example of such effects as communality and algorithmizing is offered by pandemic's hostile narratives. Initially corresponding to the ones launched in other European countries, the Romanian fake news and partisan speech related to pandemic became specific and distinct, reflecting sometimes decades old imageries and stereotypes.

Recovering diverse semiotics from communist myths (foreign conspiracy against nation), technological dystopias and pop-culture apocalyptic scenarios, initial hostile plot was transformed into collective collaborative work, perceived as authentic and real. In recent times, the true stake of hybrid threats refers to the strategic use of social and group basic values and founding mythology. These primary narrative structures, often circulated in new media architectures, are recovered by target groups, enriched with new representational layers and transformed into authentic content. As a conclusion, the communality and referential effects of the digital condition require new solutions to develop true societal resilience. New societal resilience should be defined by strong information literacy, by the ability to build consensus, by collaboration and support within various social groups, the surpass of the digital divide being also a critical objective. Creation of strong social values, reflected in democratic engagement, rule of law, efficient institutional architectures and independent media system shape the project of knowledge based social resilience.

In the light of these considerations, efficient measures to counteract nowadays hybrid challenges should imply: rising media awareness and societal capability to counteract fake news campaign, malevolent content, deep fake, malign influence campaigns; constantly exposing and revealing the activity and channels employed by

various malign players and groups, in order to counteract their ability to seize the public discourse as legitimate and accountable social actors; adapting the media climate and media practice in order to consolidate the shift amid mass-media and pseudo-media (Palau-Sampio 2023), which promotes misleading versions of the social reality, enhancing societal gaps, cultural cleavages and developmental gaps; limiting whitewashing practices for extreme and radical messages, offers and actors, that are often naturalized in digital communication ecosystem through intervention of pseudo-media websites;

V. CONCLUSIONS

The use of new digital ecosystems to promote strong knowledge-based social resilience and to limit the hybrid potential of fake news should become a key topic of contemporary debate upon media, communication and culture.

Because of the unprecedented disruption determined by pseudo-media imitating visual forms and styles used by mainstream journalists, polarized content, conspiracy theories and clickbait patterns influence public discourse, public sphere and the politics, contributing to the decline of media accountability, democratic distortions and cultural polarization.

Effects of the “*digital condition*” as referentiality, communality and algorithmizing create new vulnerabilities for media, institutions and society. Even though geographic proximity is no longer the primary measure of risk in hybrid threat and narrative war, geography matters. Hybrid war and narrative operations are based on already present affinities. Building societal resilience in mature democracies, in societies that are undergoing changes or even in contested territories and conflict areas, depends on using shared values, reinforcing basic group narratives and exploiting the potential of shared edifices of knowledge, as nation or autonomy and freedom.

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