**The return of the hypodermic needle? “Fake news,” public opinion and the political use of social networks**

“Magic bullet” and “hypodermic needle” are metaphors used by researchers to describe the powerful, direct, and omnipotent influence of the media on the public. Over the years, these powerful and direct effect approaches have been replaced by softer theories attributing limited influence to the mass media. The models that led to this semi-paradigmatic shift include the two-step flow model (Katz, 1957), which sought to indicate the purported existence of an intermediary component between the mass media as sender to the public as receiver. The direct and powerful messages underwent a process of natural and deliberate selection via opinion leaders, as well as a selection between various media for the various needs of the recipients. The media has positioned itself as a social agent, one of many, so that even if its impact is important, it is nonetheless limited.

 According to Weimann (2017), the 1960s and 1970s were a golden age for research into two-step flow communication especially opinion leaders, across a wide range of topics in media studies and other research fields. Although research employing the two-step model continued to constitute the focus of many studies, Weimann points to the need to move to a more complex model of “multi-stage flow.” Such a model is more compatible with the convergence of mass media and interpersonal communications which taken place in new media. Jensen (2010) also suggests that the two-step model must be developed in the light of digital media, which allows for a “three-stage flow of communication” including the transfer of information from one-to-one, from one-to-many, and from many-to-many. Stansberry (2017) summarizes the concept of switching to a multi-step model thus:

Instead of the top-down communication process assumed by existing models of communication flow, information in online networks appears to flow into and across communities from many different sources, and opinion leaders appear to act as both content filters and communication facilitators*.* (p.6)

Even towards the last quarter of the twentieth century, when media researchers once again tended to attribute a strong influence to the media, early theoretical concepts remained outside the picture and were considered simplistic, extreme, and irrelevant to the socio-cultural-political reality of the Western democratic world. The existence of a heterogeneous media audience which was aware of its needs and less prone to manipulation than in the past was not doubted. Likewise, the recognition that widespread interpersonal communication occurred alongside the media was not discarded, even though the perception of the status of these interpersonal networks, as well as their role in interaction with the mass media, had undergone considerable change (Lafi, 2011; McQuail, 2013). Figure 1 briefly describes the various models of information flow. The central argument of this paper relates to the multi-step model and the possibility that information flow from micro media (e.g. tweets on Twitter and posts on Facebook by politicians) may often have a direct effect on audiences.



**Figure 1: Models of information flow**

Source: Elishar-Malka & Ariel, in process

The transition to a digital communications environment, the penetration of new media into our lives, and more importantly the era of Web 2.0 and online social networks, were expected to intensify this trend, and perhaps even to re-herald the golden age of theories that attributed only a limited effect to mass media: multi-channel environments, individual customization, content consumed by shifting time or medium according to user preference, the transformation of the media audience into an active user public, and so on–-all these factors seem to point to a social media reality in which the power of the recipient is growing at the expense of the sender. But could it be that the contemporary digital media revolution and the removal of rigid distinctions between sender and recipient are akin to a golem turning on its maker? Could it be that the image of the “little citizen,” the passive media consumer of old, as one enjoying a new status of full partner in the creation and selective consumption of content, does not accurately reflect reality? The phenomenon of fake news is an effective example of the potential transition to a direct and powerful influence of senders on their audiences.

**The use of micro media to create fake news**

What is the secret to the success of “fake news”? Why do web surfers not reject it, even after initial trust it in has failed? Information that is considered fake news can bypass gatekeepers because it offers something fast, immediate, and alternative. The process by which a newspaper editorial staff was characterized as a “staff” is disappearing. It is irrelevant in the digital age. There are no more checks and balances—they are collapsing because there is no more process. There is no process, no filters, no gatekeepers. If you distribute it or upload it, then it is information, after all. The only way to verify what is real and what is fake is to activate automatic logarithms to sift through the enormous amounts of information on a network. A system that does not allow for filtering and editing within a specific timeframe would not be capable of doing this. It seems that the explanation for the success of fake news lies in some important characteristics of internet use.

*Shifts in power relations in the transition from the “fourth estate” to the “fifth estate”*

While in terms of the fourth estate, mass media can be characterized as a relatively homogeneous agent that has mutual interests and relationships of checks and balances with the other estates, the fifth estate (web surfers) undermines the balance of power and grants considerable power to both citizens and digital technocrats; however, it has no work routines or practices, no accountability for content, no guiding hand, and no philosophy of “social responsibility” (Dutton, 2009).

*Bottom-up information flow (Bottom-up approach)*

Much of the content on the web is not created/produced by traditional mechanisms of information generation. Every web surfer is a potential content creator. Thus, there is a greater willingness to accept content whose sources are unknown or unclear. The transfer of content between web surfers currently occurs in an environment wherein the right of every user to create and distribute content is considered legitimate.

*Decentralization*

The architecture of the web results in a loss of control and centralization. Information that was previously transferred in a hierarchical way, or that was easy to navigate and control, is now subject to other effects and web behaviors that, by their very nature, act according to different criteria that are more suited to “networks” and less to the influence of social agents. Concepts such as “going viral,” memes, and the adoption of innovations and ideas, spread in diverse ways and not necessarily from a single locus of control. Is the net interested in truth? The net does not give its blessing to a single truth; by its nature it offers alternatives. On each central branch one can find parallel branches and bypasses to private channels that are secret and invisible.

*Remix culture*

According to Jenkins (2006), in today’s convergence culture, production, sharing, and distribution are not the domain of a lone source but of a mixture of sources. Thus, visual and textual content produced and shared on the net is often subject to editing by various sources. The duplication and alteration of content is commonplace. Textual or visual news content may transform when it is transferred over the net. Wikipedia for example, has a vision of shared editing, and during an event it is common to see jointly-written news emerging. Reference to sources like Twitter or blogs has become widespread. In times of crisis, gatekeepers fail. In times of crisis, there is no opportunity to verify and cross-reference sources. We are quickly heading toward a state of crisis news. Given that the work routine of new media is around the clock, there are no editions or deadlines, editorial departments do not close, and there is no opportunity to decide what should be included and what left out. All that is relevant is the immediate and the urgent. Thus, there is a constant feeling of crisis. There are only fragments of information, all of them “breaking,” all of them “important,” and thus in this hour of crisis more and more of them become unfiltered news. News reports are not sufficiently edited, or there is insufficient verification of real or false claims, since there “is no time” or “no capacity,” given the rate at which news is breaking, for discretion to be exercised. Thus, reports include truth and fabrication, and a platform for the emergence of fake news is created.

*Automatic dissemination and low investment in editing information*

Phenomena like clicktivism and slacktivism emphasize the relative cognitive laziness of web surfers who choose to share messages (or “like” them) without making the cognitive-emotional investment required for an in-depth reading or an actual response. In this way, the ease with which unchecked or false messages are transmitted increases. Traditional media like newspapers, radio, or television share a certain “logic” affected by technologies and work routines. For example, in traditional media, deadlines and space limitations dictated and continue to dictate the style of headlines and sub-headers. They (the headlines) are not necessarily a product of the content, but a construct that has developed because traditional media requires order (beginning/middle/end), and they are adapted to a general audience and are not personalized. The net does not need to operate according to this “logic.” The net is dynamic. Headlines can be “organized” afresh at every moment and/or according to the personal preferences of the user. Thus, a newspaper tweeting via its Twitter account a sentence or article with continuous updates on a rolling news story can later turn this into an article that is a collection of tweets or comments. Does this not have an effect on reporting? Common sense suggests that writing on Facebook or Twitter impacts the manner of reporting. If these are the foundations and roots on which contemporary journalists base longer reports, then gradually we can expect profound changes in the structure of reporting as well.

**“Fake news” as direct influence**

This article argues that in today’s media environment, we can identify signs that indicate the possibility that we should reexamine approaches that attribute to the mass media a very powerful effect, in the spirit of the imagery of the hypodermic needle and magic bullet. The immediate context is how politicians use online social networks to create direct connections with potential voters and with other audiences. As part of these direct outreach strategies, some of these politicians—for example U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli President Binyamin Netanyahu—accuse the traditional media of spreading false information, “fake news,” while they themselves disseminate information, the veracity of which is controversial. In this way, these leaders manage to beat a fast and direct path for themselves to the worlds of their voters: traditional agents are accused of biases and a lack of professionalism to the point of undermining their legitimacy, and a clear call is made for them to be switched for information channels provided by the politicians themselves. At the same time, these same elements work to influence these direct media channels with “alternative” news stories that put them in a good light.

We do not intend to argue that the hypodermic needle theory deserves to be re-adopted in its entirety. Certain elements of it, for example, the attribution of uniform effects on the recipient public, and the perception of said public as a passive audience, do not stand the test of reality: the audience of web surfers, followers, and Twitter users is by its nature active, and the differences between usage patterns and content uploaded by various users are clear to see. Other components, such as the attribution of influences at the micro and short-term levels, deserve thorough analysis in future work. It seems that, at this stage, most research attention should be directed to the issue of powerful and direct effects, since in the online space, and perhaps even within it, there may be direct injections of information from powerful sources to weaker audiences who have no real ability to counter these messages.

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