

Translation of “ Il pensiero critico come arma contro l’informazione che non forma”

Critical Thinking as a Weapon Against Disinformation

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Abstract

The paper aims to reflect on information and the ambivalent character it can take on. New media provide greater pluralism and widespread access to information, but they very easily escape news control. Far from demonizing the Web, the invitation is to consider it a mirror of society, of which it reflects the problems and, above all, reflects the way people are, including their approach to the world of information. In fact, the tendency to access and disseminate information in the absence of proper critical evaluation is by no means a specific consequence of the digital environment. History testifies that information manipulation and propaganda are not new phenomena. An attempt to curb this state of affairs requires our diligence and commitment that, combined with the positive potential of the new media itself, will increase the influence on "good information." The latter plays a key role with respect to the delicate balances of geopolitics and can help ensure the highest democratic values: security, prosperity and peace. A word, the latter, only apparently simple, as our etymology reveals.

So, what is the most effective weapon at our disposal against disinformation? Critical thinking: a fundamental tool of defense that keeps our conscience vigilant, often, clouded by manipulation aimed at preventing debate.

Chapter One

Truth and War: an oxymoron?

Truth and War: two difficult terms to reconcile. Already, the Greeks used to say "the first casualty of war is truth." In war, anything goes and, unfortunately, one of the principal, oldest and most obvious strategies to which parties involved in conflicts resort is the manipulation of truth. And, here, called into play information has become, today more than ever, a strategic weapon, albeit less bloody than others. Information and disinformation in wars play a crucial role. In every war there is another war being played out on the virtual terrain of communication. The goal is always the same, to alter the perception of what is really happening.

The relationship between the mass media and war has been characterized since the birth of the first information tools by an intense bond of mutual dependence, as if innovations in the field of communication were from time to time in the service of military operations and, at the same time, the mass media found in the events of war a ground for experimentation and increase of their own potential.

Today, this fact has become dramatically revealing because ongoing wars are not only "real," "traditional" wars, but are increasingly "hybrid wars." Also referred to as "fourth-generation wars," they are the most common type of ongoing conflicts: ambiguous, low-intensity kinetic wars flank the more classic theologies of warfare. These hybrid wars incorporate a diverse range of patterns of aggression and defense. Indeed, in them it is not so much (or only) important to hit the enemy with "fire" as to destabilize him economically and socially, and especially psychologically. They are often "silent wars," undeclared, serving of apparatuses that carry out targeted activities of disinformation, propaganda, social engineering, PsyOps, "battle of narrative," where so-called fake news plays a decisive role. What in peacetime are simple "hoaxes," when the winds of war are blowing are likely to turn into an army of far more dangerous fake news, constructed ad hoc with the sophisticated input of the various disciplines that information warfare makes use of, multiplied, amplified by social and enlisted by states to fight their battles

## Chapter Two

### Information disorder: the pathology of the digital age

There is a composite category, traceable to the phenomenon of information disorder, under which various forms of "media deviance" fall. Among the main ones: disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. Beginning with the latter, it "consists of the creation and propagation of inaccurate news and information that generates a perception of nonexistent or erroneous facts and data, which in turn become commonplaces or "truths" of convenience. A groove is thus created between official truths, truths of convenience and the reality of things.

Often this kind of activity is due to bad journalism--yellow journalism--or the inadequate professional quality of those working in the world of communication (from media agencies, photographers, newsrooms, etc.,). Misinformation can be defined as "inaccurate or false information that is disseminated without explicit intention to mislead," due to flippancy or lack of verification of sources. It is the communicative situation in which we most commonly find ourselves, without knowing it. Misinformation, on the other hand, is false information spread with the intention of deceiving people. Those who spread the "news" know that it is false. In this way people make decisions that are contrary to their real desires or interests! A typical strategy of disinformation is to combine some truth with lies, presenting the proposed overall picture as true and, often, as the only one possible. Disinformation is not intended to promote public debate--quite the opposite, in fact. In fact, it pushes people to adopt extreme and definitive positions and beliefs that leave no room for compromise or a desire for further investigation.

While it is possible and appropriate to identify the specificity of each of the aforementioned phenomena, it is worth noting how interrelated they are. In fact, those who organize disinformation and those who unwittingly spin news, not realizing that it is false or inaccurate, feed everything into the great web or media circuit, becoming accomplices of those who consciously act and cause damage, more or less tangible!

Analysis of the current landscape reveals a clear situation: the proliferation of information platforms whose standards are little or not at all regulated; the mass media sometimes unwittingly or culpably absent, sometimes tools of propaganda. And, the users of the information world? Well, of the latter, one can only denounce the frequent passivity!

As for us young people, more native generation of instantaneous communication technologies, using almost exclusively as a source of news, the net. It, too often, becomes the only medium capable of giving voice to our information needs, but exposes us to the many dangers of information disorder. That is why, more than other age groups, we are called upon to become aware of what Reporters Without Borders (Rsf) has argued: we are facing a historical moment poised between post-truth and propaganda. We live in "expanded and altered regimes of truth." The rules of communication have changed, because the paradigm of reality within which we live has changed. Truths are liquid and are fabricated through perception management techniques.

To control the perception of reality is to control reality! This was well understood, too, by the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes that made this belief one of their strongest elements, relying on unique, manipulated, often false information capable of generating consent, enthusiasm, respect, addiction or fear, depending on the case.

In recent decades, the landscape of information in general, and that of war information in particular, has changed a lot. It clearly emerges that communication is one of the most powerful tools that can alter the balance of peace.

But, what does "peace" mean? It might seem simple to define this concept, especially if it is limited to the meaning of "condition of absence of conflict", whether it concerns peoples, adverse, contenders who confront each other in the most aggressive and frightening ways as in war or in the most playful and harmless ones of childhood.

The term derives from the Latin *pax, pacis*, from the same root *pak- pag-* which is found in *pangere* "to fix, to agree" and *pactum* "pact". Attested in the oldest Latin, with a strong value of "contract, understanding, commitment taken between two contractors", it does not limit itself to marking the absence of war, but underlines the re-establishment of a condition of normality after a conflict. Here emerges the complexity of the concept of "peace".

The experience of the second post-war period has shown us how a stable and prosperous coexistence can be built even in the aftermath of bloody conflicts, but it also teaches us that, for the maintenance of peace, a great commitment is needed from all multiple directions and in contexts, at times, unthinkable!

## Conclusion

### The contribution of "good" information to "positive peace"

The retreat of truth, threatened every day also by the perverse mass media system, endangers irrefutable democratic values that have been re-established with so much effort. Against the information war we need, then, a journalism of peace, which we young people, before others, must recognize, support, and practice. It is a type of journalism that avoids focusing exclusively on news "from the front" that tells the story of the fighting and offers a dramatic but also, sometimes, simplistic image. It opts for a type of information that investigates the underlying causes of conflicts, their invisible effects, the possibilities of resorting to the only noble weapons, namely those of diplomatic negotiation. A journalism that works for peace, evaluating its real prospects and influencing its processes as much as possible.

It is a new information and communication paradigm inspired by peace, where everyone is called to play an active role as fact-checker, contributing, even to a small extent, to the emergence of truth. An important commitment, which, however, cannot be required exclusively of the big ones - governments, multinationals, mass media systems - but which must be taken from "below". If, in fact, we live immersed in a form of war that exposes us to the systematic manipulation of information, it becomes essential to develop the practice of "active skepticism" on the part of everyone. It is a form of careful and militant critical thinking, able to provide subjects with media awareness.

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Becoming a peacemaker may, then, not be so out of reach of the ordinary citizen. What is needed is first to embrace an ethic of information and communication, grounded in a desire for critical insight.

Assuming as criteria for verifying news the accuracy, consistency, temporal contextualization, completeness, as well as the reputation of the author and the source of the news, involves adopting a systematic habit of checking, without bias or ideological distortion, the credibility of the information with which we live in contact. This also helps to act in advance, learning how so-called "cognitive belligerents" act and the forms that messages that manipulate reality take.

We need to move from a sporadic need to an established practice of control, which can only arise and be cultivated at school, through strong media-educational action aimed at developing the capacity for verification in young people that avoids the risk of entire generations living, unknowingly, at the mercy of a myriad of micro-wars.

This is a battle for democracy, because as Albert Camus said "where lies proliferate, tyranny thrives."

Peace, Security and Prosperity do not come about by themselves, but are the result of the concrete efforts of people and states. These are not utopias or mere ideals, but concrete, albeit ambitious, goals. Concrete "constructions" that can be supported by the "Eight Pillars," outlined by John Galtung, within the

broad program of Positive Peace. Through the Transcend method, devised by the Norwegian sociologist, it is possible to embrace a culture that includes, alongside the implementation of targeted and conscious policies, the involvement of as many people as possible as partners in Peace, called upon to assume the strategic role of conscious agents of good information.