THE FAKE NEWS ECOSYSTEM AND THE ISSUE OF RESPONSIBILITY: VELES-MACEDONIA PRODUCTION, TECH PLATFORM DISTRIBUTION, AND AMERICAN CONSUMPTION

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Abstract: *“Creators, consumers, and arbiters of disinformation have a reinforcing effect on each other. This leads to a fake news ecosystem” (Kshetri, Voas 5). We take this observation as our point of departure to explore the issue of responsibility of the main actors within a given fake news ecosystem: content producers, platform distributors, and consuming audiences. We undertook an empirical research in Veles, Macedonia where there is a large community of fake news producers, in order to have a first-hand understanding of the phenomena. The paper aims to ask two main questions: Q1) Whose responsibility is it for fake news: the producer’s, the distributor’s, the user’s? and Q2) How is responsibility distributed? The working hypothesis is that the producers, the consumers and the arbiters of disinformation have a reinforcing effect upon one other that make them function in a vicious circle that allows for the production, reproduction and dissemination of fake news.*

Keywords: *fake news; responsibility; producer; platform; consumer; public interest*

Introduction

We live in paradoxical times. On the one hand, the sheer quantity of information that is available in the public space is much higher than a few decades ago, and many societies are increasingly open. On the other hand, the degree of disinformation is on the rise (Ireton, Posetti), and the informational divides are getting deeper. One of the most worrying phenomena is that fake news shape the way we perceive the world we live in, and the representation becomes sometimes deformed. Moreover, by the very means of our social actions in the online environment, we get to ‘attack’, willingly or unwillingly, the very foundations of democracy as well as the professional journalistic sphere (Wardle). We contribute and help create some ‘mass destruction weapons’ (Bârgăoanu, Radu) that further generate an informational disorder (Wardle, Derakshan). All these issues manifest themselves in an unregulated framework, while under the umbrella of protecting net neutrality, public policy initiatives are slow to materialize. In the era of post-truth (Higgins), we all have

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the democratic responsibility to ecologize our environment in terms of the quality of informational products. "We must use technology, instead, to free our minds and use regulation to restore democratic accountability."[1]

Post-truth society and fake news

The Internet has a shining face as well as a darker one. If we depart from the enthusiastic narrative accompanying the rise of the Internet, with its promise of democratization of communication and endless benefits, the other face of the coin presents a dimension of risk. The inventor of the Internet himself, Tim Berners-Lee, in an intervention from 2019 on the celebration of 30 years of World Wide Web, pointed out:

> While the web has created opportunity, given marginalised groups a voice, and made our daily lives easier, it has also created opportunity for scammers, given a voice to those who spread hatred, and made all kinds of crime easier to commit. (Berners-Lee)

Moreover, Berners-Lee identified three main sources of contemporary web dysfunctionalities:

> *Deliberate, malicious intent*, such as state-sponsored hacking and attacks, criminal behaviour, and online harassment. *System design that creates perverse incentives* where user value is sacrificed, such as ad-based revenue models that commercially reward clickbait and the viral spread of misinformation. *Unintended negative consequences of benevolent design*, such as the outraged and polarised tone and quality of online discourse. (Berners-Lee)

One of the dysfunctionalities amplified by the design of the system is fake news. The very structure of the system creates the premises for perverse incentives whereby both the users as well as journalistic values are sacrificed. The social media consumer is commodified, he/she becomes a resource in the revenue model based on advertisements. The consumer contributes to rolling the contents in the online environment by means of engagement and shares. This economic model eludes public interest and emphasizes the quantitative valorization of content (reach, likes, comments, share) over against the qualitative one. The focus on the quantitative allows for the monetization of the click-bait and the opportunity of fake contents to go viral.

[1] Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report, House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee: 6
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf

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The peak of the debates on the effects of fake news on society was reached in the context of the Brexit campaign in Great Britain and the presidential elections in the United States in 2016. It was a moment of awakening for the whole society, because it revealed the most important moment of democracy, voting, can be tarnished. Consequent studies have shown the real dimension of disinformation during the two campaigns. In the same year, the Oxford Dictionaries indicated *post-truth* as the word of the year, considering that its use had risen with 2000% from the previous year. It is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[2]

The metaphor of post-truth makes us aware of a more complex process, which we have so far ignored. It indicates a degradation of the quality of the informational ecosystem by means of an exponential increase of content based on opinions and personal experiences and the lack of trust in traditional sources of information (Bârgăoanu 82). All the while, in the context of the digital encounters "appearances can easily be mistaken for essences, superficiality for meaning provider and a moment's emotion for an objective fact" (Dâncu 2).[3]

In the literature, the concept of fake news is both hard to define as it is contested. Moreover, there are not a few of those who recommend the term not be used at all. For example, the term is associated with a mechanism that produces the degradation of the media ecosystem, becoming meaningless for the users. Some of the media users associate it with the legacy media bias, and that is an erroneous perception because legacy media do implement filters that verify and manage the publication flow by means of editorial structures, as well as specialized professional functions:

> The term fake news has become a mechanism for undermining individual journalists and the professional media as a whole. As a result, the term is now almost entirely meaningless: when audiences are asked about the term, they believe it describes poor reporting of the mainstream media. (Wardle 83-84)

An illuminating perspective is offered by the UNESCO manual *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Ireton, Posetti). The manual refers to news as verifiable information in the public interest, and it explains the logical fracture of the unhappy combination between 'news' and 'fake':

[2] Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year, 2016, available at: https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

[3]Available at https://www.revistasinteza.ro/in-romania-post-adevarului

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> 'News' means verifiable information in the public interest, and information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news. In this sense then, 'fake news' is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – i.e. real news. (Berger 7)

Likewise, in the "Disinformation and 'Fake News': Final Report, House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee"[4] there is a fine distinction made between the deliberate and the non-deliberate act of creating and sharing fake and/or manipulated content. The document pleads, in its turn, for the avoidance of the term *fake news*:

> In our work we have defined disinformation as the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. 'Misinformation' refers to the inadvertent sharing of false information. (Disinformation and 'Fake News'"10)

Other authors argue that besides disinformation and misinformation, a third term should be added, namely malinformation, in order to better capture the complex phenomena generated by the informational chaos.

> We defined *misinformation* as false information shared by someone who believes it to be true. *Disinformation,* by contrast, is false information shared with knowledge of its falsity and thus intention to deceive or otherwise do harm. It is deliberate, intentional lie. We also defined a third category, *malinformation*, which is information based in reality that is shared to do harm to a person, organization, or country. (Wardle 84)[5]

In the context of information disorder, there is yet a fourth term, which challenges the normative theory of journalism on the objective coverage of reality and the presentation of facts in an objective manner, by means of multiple sources to validate the information. This is 'alternative facts'. The concept is quite recent, and it was launched by one of Donald Trump's

[4] Available at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf

[5] Available at https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Types-of-Information-Disorder-Venn-Diagram.png

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councillors shortly after Trump was invested as president in 2017. It emerged in the context of the debates on the number of participants at the inaugural opening of the presidency of the United States of America, which in 2017 was compared with the number of participants at the inauguration of the former president, Barack Obama. The term has very serious implications for the journalistic practice by inducing the idea that there can be multiple 'truths'.

In this logic, the facts are emptied of meaning; they enter the grey zone of fuzziness and, implicitly, enhance the phenomenon of lack of trust in the political and media institutions. In this context, the public space is conquered by dry discourses, by a cacophony of voices, whereby various parts claim the verity of facts and accuse each other of disinformation. Somehow, partisanship and/or bias become legitimate in the communication flow within the public sphere, and the narratives displace information. Social actors are interested in stories of personal, rather than public relevance (Dâncu); that, moreover, enforces their preexisting convictions (Dean). Politicians are interested to format the discourse in the public sphere, as well as the agenda of the society, in the interest of strengthening their own positions.

All the while, the topic of disinformation is not as new as it might seem at first sight, as Peter Gross perceptively points out:

> The subtle injection of inaccurate or partially accurate facts, selectively amplified, poorly verified or based on anonymous sources, innuendo, rumors, predictions, opinions and all the rest of plainly wrong information and poor interpretations, marinated in the poisoned juice of ideology, religions, and all other cultural certitudes, are all techniques older than Methuselah himself. (Gross)

The proliferation of the mass means of communication and information only makes the phenomenon more obvious than ever. The media amplify the emergence of voices, which are more or less professional, in the production of content, as well as the very rapid distribution, sometimes by means of paid promotion, towards a large, apparently endless, basin of consumers. The platforms merely reproduce the same practices, which legacy media are so much blamed for, that lead to known results such as the agenda-setting effect, gate-keeping (van Dijck, Hacker 185-187), disinformation, propaganda, and hate-speech among others.

On responsibility

The issue of responsibility is widely acknowledged and debated among theoreticians and researchers, in the context of the reconfiguration of the public sphere by means of interactions between various stakeholders. We refer to the

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actors involved in the knowledge and information production, in the context of the development and innovation within the Information Technology and Communications field:

> The arrival of the internet as a new medium has enlarged the scope of the discussion. The internet began without any assigned public communication amenity, open to all and without the drawbacks of state control. However, it has increasingly developed as a set of large global private enterprises, with primary goals of profit. Its potential as a public service still exists but this feature has become more marginal, leading to demands for protection of some public open space for citizen uses. (McQuail 40-41)

Unfortunately, the increase of the influence of this technology-driven practice in society has occurred "before a real debate about public values and common goods could get started" (van Dijck et al.2); and that reveals the fact that we have actually lost our role as stakeholder of the consistency and quality of messages around us, without even being aware of this aspect. The Internet as a medium of communication is defined in the literature as the result of the interaction of four cultures: the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual community culture, and the entrepreneurial culture; these cultures contribute to an ideology of freedom spread at the level of the digital space (Castells 37). Nevertheless, the ideology of freedom is not the founding culture of this medium of communication, because it does not directly intervene in the development of the technological system itself. We actually missed our opportunity to really negotiate our rights and responsibilities within the process of digital information, of setting our collective rights, of defining the public interest and the media product as a common good.

Responsibility is commonly defined in the dictionary as "a duty to deal with or take care of somebody/something, so that you may be blamed if something goes wrong."[6] Thus, responsibility is to be considered in its dual aspect, from the perspective of the task to be accomplished, and also from the accountability it entails in terms of standards and values, in the social and cultural context where the action takes place.

In principle, the responsibility of content published on the platforms belongs to the one that generated it, in the larger framework of the indestructible relation between creator and creation; that represents the legacy of intellectual authorship[7]. At the same time, "in the virtual space, free content re-usage and anonymity are two elements that allow a *de facto* lack of

[6] *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/

[7] See the Berna Convention for the main principles of intellectual creation https://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/berne/

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accountability for content appropriation, and blatant theft from authors" (Petre 15). In this context, we agree that:

> Social media companies cannot hide behind the claim of being merely a 'platform' and maintain that they have no responsibility themselves in regulating the content of their sites. We repeat the recommendation from our Interim Report that a new category of tech company is formulated, which tightens tech companies' liabilities, and which is not necessarily either a 'platform' or a 'publisher'. This approach would see the tech companies assume legal liability for content identified as harmful after it has been posted by users.[8]

It is not to be forgotten, though, that the current attempts at regulation take place in a context of deep resentment and suspicion of all government interventions that are perceived to limit the freedom of expression and the right to access to knowledge. Recent regulations like Directive 2019/790 on copyright and related rights in the Digital Single Market[9] and the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive[10] aim to protect the creators in the virtual space and set standards for content accountability.

In the larger discussion about responsibility, we cannot ignore the concept of 'public interest'. This concept keeps on fuelling large discussions both in the social and in the political theory. The classic communication scholar Denis McQuail has defined public interest thus:

> Its simple meaning is that they carry out a number of important, even essential, tasks and it is 'in the general interest' (or good of the majority) that these are carried out well and according to principles of efficiency, justice, fairness, and respect for current social and cultural values. (McQuail 40)

Fake news producers from Veles, Macedonia; responsibility on the production end

In this section of the paper we analyze the issue of responsibility for fake news in a production site. We gathered interviews with young fake content producers from the town of Veles, Macedonia, first in the early part of 2019 and then in the early part of 2020. The encounters were conducted by the Macedonian member of our research team. The small town of Veles raised from anonymity

[8] Disinformation and 'Fake News': Final Report, House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 10.
[9] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/790/oj
[10] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/audiovisual-media-services-directive-avmsd

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to global fame because the fake news produced and distributed from there had a proven influence on the American presidential elections from 2016. BuzzFeed[11] and *The Guardian*[12] identified more than one hundred and fifty fake news sites run by teenagers from Veles. These sites were having American-sounding domain names such as WorldPoliticus.com, TrumpVision365.com, USConservativeToday.com, DonaldTrumpNews.co, and USADailyPolitics.com; they almost all published aggressively pro-Trump content aimed at conservatives and Trump supporters in the US.[13]

The interviewees accepted to talk to us upon respecting their anonymity. Thus, in our analysis we identify the interviewees as S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5. The average duration of an interview was of 20 minutes. The age of the interviewees at the time of the research was between 23 and 24, their level of education varying from elementary education in two cases to higher education for another three. All of them had no stable employment at the time of the interview and no instruction in journalism whatsoever. We should add that these young people became rich because of this activity, as well as well-known at a national as well as international level. They take pride on their digital knowledge and consider that what they do is internet marketing, not journalism.

We asked the fake news producers to define what they do in their own terms. We wanted to understand how these people relate cognitively to what they do, and how they perceive their responsibility towards both the contents they generate and the end users of their fake content. The interviewees defined fake news in personal terms, rather than communitarian or institutional ones. They associate this activity with making good and fast money, and with popularity: "Fake news in today's society is a process whereby each person (...) can make a lot of money and hit big success on the advertising scene" (S1). "Fake news in today's society is a true lie that everybody knows but just does not realize" (S3). "For me, fake news is the false information that gets shaped as a result of aggregating the public opinion" (S4). "Fake news is a kind of job where you sit every night and think how to write and what to write on various pages in order to become popular, as well as rich" (S5).

[11] "How Teens in the Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters with Fake News," available at: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo

[12] "How Facebook Powers Money Machines for Obscure Political 'News' Sites," available at: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/24/facebook-clickbait-political-news-sites-us-election-trump

[13] "How Teens in the Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters with Fake News," available at: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo

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The interviewees consider fake news a job, a profession, and a business that allows people to become rich easily. At the same time, they consider that anybody can engage in this activity, and that the content can be about anything, as long as it has the potential to draw attention: "Fake news is a profession for the money, which in the last years has become very common among the youth, because one can very easily make money; but the effects are both positive and negative" (S1); "Fake news for me is a king of chore that anybody can do and make a career or become known in this world" (S2); "Fake news is a business that anybody can join and write anything that draws the attention of the public" (S4). "Fake news for me is all the information that the public prefers without realizing that they are fake" (S5). We get the idea that responsibility falls on the shoulders of the ones who do not make a difference between true and false content, and who get exposed to what they like and prefer. The fake news producers provide the content the people want, in a simple supply and demand mechanics which bypasses truth. The fake news producers pay attention to the popular content that generates traffic because this is the source of the advertising money that represents their regular income, directly from Google.

When we discuss responsibility, we should speak as well about accountability and consequences for not being up to the task. In this vein, we tried to understand the risks and consequences of engaging in fake news production: "There is always a risk when you make an investment, the biggest risk for me was that I lost my Facebook account through which I was operating" (S1); "The risk was not all that terrible, the only thing that happened to me was the loss of my Facebook account, I am no longer allowed to exist in that network" (S2). "To be honest, at first I was a little afraid because it was about politics, and because I was writing for important people like Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, but the risks did not prove to be serious; it is just that I can no longer exist on Facebook with my name" (S3); "There was a risk that scared me a little and that was the possibility not to be paid at the end of the month, in other words 'Frozen account'"(S4); "I was not afraid, not even when I first started to do this, I was not worried that I would not have a Facebook account, that was no risk to me, but the biggest risk was that I joined something that was not legal at all" (S5).

In terms of the justification for engaging in fake news production, even though they realize the negative effects, the recurrent idea of the respondents is that what they do is not motivated by the desire to do harm. The young people find justifications by referring to the personal benefits and the amplitude of the phenomenon – the large number of people in Veles that engaged in fake news on the occasion of the 2016 American elections. At the same time, they do not seem to acknowledge their own responsibility when posting fake news: "Of course that the spreading of content that leads to disinformation is not a good thing to do because it might have a negative effect

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at the level of the audience; but I am not all that worried about it because it was by far the most profitable thing to do so far in my life" (S1); "For me it is a correct thing, for others of course not, because they trusted fake news to be true" (S2); "We all know it is not correct, but that does not make me a bad person, I am still a moral person, and even quite an emotional one; but fake news is just business and I am not the only one who does it" (S3); "I did it for myself, in my country it is not something new because most of the things in Macedonia are fake; it is legal and anybody can write whatever he/she wants. I just wanted the money, and I did not consider whether it was fair for others or not. I took the decision to write because it was about myself and my benefits" (S4)

In the light of the above narratives, we can legitimately ask ourselves: How can public responsibility be enforced as a value at the level of particular individuals, not corporate platforms or media institutions? These young people do not think about journalism or public interest, and there is no legal requirement for a particular individual to do so. They only think about money and fame, and their responsibility, from their point of view, is towards market maximization. Moreover, there are no serious negative consequences if they do not think in terms of public responsibility for the contents that they spread around. The worst thing that could happen to them was to have their Facebook account frozen. The fake news production sites are not institutionalized media practices, but individual private activities. At a personal level, fake news production comes with benefits in terms of money and fame. The interviewees do not consider that they do journalism, but internet marketing. Thus, from their point of view, their responsibility is to provide content that is liked by the audiences, creates traffic, and brings them easy money.

Platform corporate responsibility

In the case of the content distributors, the platforms, the tracking of responsibility should start from the role that these organizations assume. They define themselves as technology companies. The tech-giants do not consider themselves content platforms, media organizations, or editorial companies. In this structural way, these 'tech companies' flout taking responsibility for the content that they lodge. Instead, the platforms create specific affordances for the content producers, one related to the creation and editing of content, and another related to the promotion of paid content. The latter affords the choice of psycho-social characteristics of the audience for an efficient message targeting. In this way, the responsibility moves in the direction of the content user and producer. At the same time, "as an algorithm-driven global editor and news gatekeeper for over 2 billion users, Facebook has tremendous power over much of the world's information system" (Pickard 136). It is as if there was a building owner hosting a library on one floor and a drug-dealers operation on

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another floor. The owner would have nothing to do with the operations of the tenants as long as they dutifully occupy the space. However,

> Facebook must be treated as a media company and held to norms of social responsibility. Thus far, Mark Zuckerberg has refused to even acknowledge that Facebook is anything more than a technology company. In the meantime, the repercussion of Facebook's profit-driven control over the world's media will likely only worsen. This is an untenable situation; democratic societies must challenge Facebook's monopoly power on multiple fronts. (Pickard 137)

If we consider the issue of responsibility from a firm's perspective, we see that free-market corporations should assume a social responsibility, too, besides the profit making one. Thus, the actions of an organization should aim towards the wellbeing of all the parts involved. Tech companies, while discursively acknowledging the need for opening up and negotiating regulation, are active promoters of self-regulation (Smyth) as a mechanism of containment and keeping others at bay:

> As part of his apology tour, Zuckerberg himself conceded (at least publicly) an openness to regulation. So the real question becomes what kind of regulation? Do we repeat old mistakes and impose self-regulation requirements that will erode over time? Or do we subject Facebook's monopolistic power to real public oversight and implement redistributive measures? Thus far, discussions have focused mostly on users' privacy, which is vitally important. But we should consider a broader, bolder vision for what Facebook owes society in return for the incredible power we've allowed it to accumulate. (Pickard 138)

At the same time, for the platform developers, the affordances are an argument to elude their own responsibility regarding the contents, as they consider themselves only tools creators, and not curators or content creators.

The "platform society" does not merely shift the focus from economic to the social; the term refers to a profound dispute about private gain versus public benefit in a society where most interactions are carried out via the Internet. While platforms allegedly enhance personalized benefits and economic gain, they simultaneously put pressure on collective means and public services (van Dijck et al. 2).

In the case under study, the fake news from Veles, Macedonia, the fake content producers were paid directly by the platform, on a monthly basis, based on the advertising that their content was attracting on their sites. The youth of Veles were constantly optimizing the content, so that it continued attracting a

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lot of viewers, and that in turn was financially acknowledged by the platform. The only responsibility that the platforms took in this case was to give money to the ones able to produce traffic that could further be monetized via advertising by the tech-giant. It was indeed the case that after the outrage which this situation created in the world, the platform took the responsibility to freeze some Facebook accounts. For the rest, the business model remained intact.

The responsibility of the media users

Audiences are generally expected to be rational and get the point of the messages that enter their daily lives. Nevertheless, numerous reality checks show that ordinary people are usually not very rational, but quite prone to legitimate narratives that confirm their preexisting biases. In their most recent study, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (RIDNR) published in 2020 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism from Oxford University, we find out that 57% of the American citizens use social media as information resource (RIDNR 11), compared with 2013 when the percentage was 27% (RIDNR 88). At the same time, 67% of the American respondents expressed their worry on the report between real and fake news in the online environment (RIDNR 19). The main platforms that concern the users in terms of dissemination of fake or deceitful content are: Facebook (35%), followed by Twitter (7%), WhatsApp (7%), and YouTube (5%). Another significant element that is identified in this quantitative study is the report between the news users and their sources of information in terms of shared viewpoints. It refers to the choice of media coverage that is in accordance with the values and perceptions on reality that the consumers already have. Thus, it turns out that 42% of the Americans watch TV news channels that share their points of view, 51% channels that do not present a point of view (neutral), while 7% get exposed to channels that contradict their own points of view. When it comes to social media, the ones that share the same point of view are followed by 35% of the users, the neutral ones by 56%, and the ones that contradict the point of view by 8%. Last but not least, when it comes to the written press, 28% of the respondents read the ones that confirm their perspective, 66% the neutral ones, and 6% the ones that contest their point of view (RIDNR 20).

The phenomena of echo chambers and filter bubbles (epistemic bubbles) are not isolate cases in media consumption. In these cases, the media consumer becomes captive to a perpetual process of reconfirmation of his/her own convictions, thus narrowing the very opportunity of being exposed to other perspectives which would allow a larger understanding of social, cultural, economic, and political phenomena in society.

At the same time, both the echo chambers effect and the filter bubbles are directly related to the social media platform affordance. The concept of affordance explains the relation between an actor and an object, more

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specifically the opportunity for action that an object opens to an actor (Volkoff, Strong). For example, on Facebook, one of the affordances of the platform is that the users can choose their fields of interest, the pages that they wish to follow, and thus, 'produce' their own news-feed, by means of aggregation of the fields and sources that they appreciate. In principle, this is an empowering feature, but actually it structurally places the responsibility on the media consumers. It is interesting to observe how current solutions to the issue of responsibility about content place the burden of responsibility on the users themselves, irrespective of the huge difference in abilities and resources between the tech-giants and common citizens:

> Suggested remedies typically involve a combination of media literacy and user responsibility; technological fixes such as new algorithms and policing specific ad networks; and crowdsourcing to the public or outsourcing other fact-checking organizations the responsibility of flagging fake news. (Pickard 137)

In the specific case of the fake news from Macedonia, the impact was high because trust in the new media platforms was high. Nowadays, it is not that high anymore.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was the first-hand observation of the way the vicious circle of production, distribution and consumption takes place in the field of fake news, and how each party enforces the other, in a lucrative and hedonistic situation for all the parties involved. At the losing end we find truth and rationality. The three parties involved, the producers, distributors, and consumers of fake news, do not see themselves directly responsible, and actually there is no structural mechanism that would hold them accountable. In the real world, if we take a product like LSD, for example, which gives the consumer a high, all parties are held accountable: the producer for creating a product that is not healthy, the distributor for making it available to large markets, and the end user for consuming a product that is not good. In the specific case of fake news, the producers argue that their product has killed nobody; the platforms take no responsibility for whatever circulates on the avenues that they just make available, while the end users are deceived into thinking that they consume news, while they are actually faced with fake news. We propose a reconsideration of the whole paradigm of content and information ecosystem, so that there appear real opportunities for accountability, public interest, and informed decisions.

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