

Guido Nicolosi

Collective memory and the challenges of digital journalism

Abstract: Even though journalism has always been considered distinct from history and has itself always aspired to newsworthiness, it is one of the most relevant cultural and social areas for the production and maintenance of collective memory. Journalistic information systematically and continuously shapes the way in which communities in modern societies order past events. Disintermediation and transformations in the processes of production and use of information radically challenge the methods consolidated by a centuries-old path of news-making. Particularly, the main critical question today is: can misinformation shored up by the spreading of fake news distort memory and impact negatively on people's perception of their future? This essay attempts to analyse the risks and opportunities that these transformations have introduced in the context of the production of public memory, trying to avoid apodictic readings and highlighting the ambiguity of concepts that are often in mainstream use today.

Keywords: Cultural memory, journalism, misinformation, fake-news, digital media

Introduction: Cultural memory, the public sphere and journalism

The “science of memory” emerged in the nineteenth century. Galton (1892), Bergson (1896), Ribot (1881), Freud (1901), Ebbinghaus (1913), Semon (1921, 1923): these are some of the most famous names bound up with this new scientific and philosophical orientation. Alongside these there are others who are now considered to play a key role in the understanding of the social bases of memory: Vygotsky (2007), Bartlett (1974) and, above all, Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1950) who were the first to explicitly define memory as a social fact on the grounds that all memories are underpinned by social structures which act as a canvas on which the past which makes communication and sharing possible is depicted.

From the starting point of this era, a multiplicity of interwoven factors (scientific discoveries, technological innovations, social changes and political transformations) have led to the past taking on functional symbolic importance in individual and collective identity shaping. Subsequent studies on collective, social and cultural memory (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964, 1965; Le Goff, 1977; Anderson, 1983; Nora, 1984; Assman, 1997; etc.) have made it a fully-fledged

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research sphere with its own specific scientific and academic legitimacy: memory studies.

In brief, we can distinguish between three conceptual fields of reference (Guzzi, 2011): “collective”, “social” and “cultural” memory. The first denotes groups’ memory heritage characterised by powerful identity bonds – family, religious community, class. The “social memory” concept, on the other hand, denotes a wider communication sphere encompassing the arena within which the various collective memory discourses vie for relevance and plausibility. To a considerable extent this corresponds to the term “public memory”. Lastly, “cultural memory” denotes the past’s influence over the present via symbolic legacies, rites and traditions.

The media and journalists play an extremely significant part in the public-memory-shaping process. Drawing on Habermas’s thought, public memory can be considered to be a public sphere memory (Habermas, 2005). In some ways the public sphere is itself memory, as Paolo Jedlowski rightly argued (2007), as it only exists as a constant and diachronic dialogue between ideas and arguments, both past and present. But this is not all. The public sphere also encompasses and elaborates past discourses, arguments and narratives which are constantly marshalled to shore up theories, back up stances and support collective ideas and so on. Public memory is thus ultimately an “image of the past under public debate”. And it performs two fundamental functions: (a) defining the “plausibility and relevance criteria” by which traces of the past are selected from the vast patrimony available to groups and societies; (b) delineating the arena in which group collective memories dialogue with one another, lose their self-referential quality and are subject to critical analysis. Jedlowski interestingly acknowledged the fundamental importance of two key issues: the selection matrix at work in public memory, which inevitably tends to exclude certain stances and theories considered marginal, and the increasingly important role played by non-rational, identity-based or imaginary symbolic arguments.

The memory-journalism bond can seem counter-intuitive. Journalism has always been considered distinct from history and has itself always aspired to newsworthiness, a quality powerfully bound up with proximity, relevance and novelty (Zelizer, 2010). However, from the late 1980s onwards, collective memory studies have devoted a great deal of attention to journalism and the role it plays in shaping memories and the collective reconstruction of the past, because it is increasingly clear that group memories are powerfully influenced by themed agendas. Media sociologists, in particular, have increasingly highlighted a persistent preference on the part of journalists for events preceding currently-under-way news items. Three aspects of the past are journalistically

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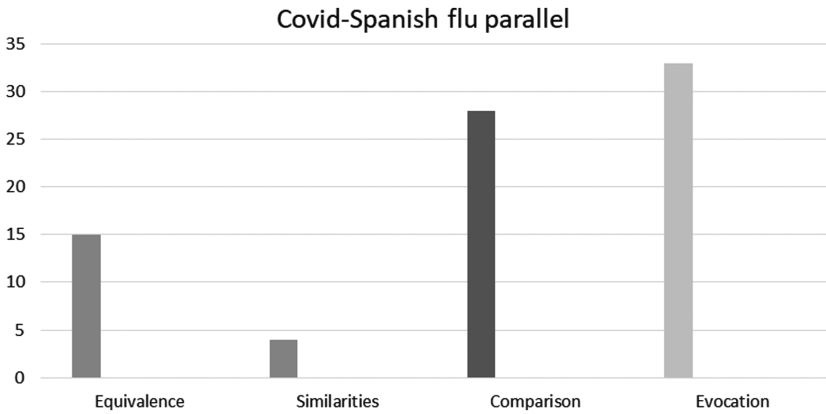
appealing: commemoration, historical analogies, historical contexts. In this sense journalists can certainly be said to be “memory agents” of great importance, although many journalists would probably reject such a definition.

For Lang and Lang (1989) collective memory selects from a set of images of the past which retain their historic relevance by means of a re-mediation process. In this sense journalism is fundamentally important memory work. The reference to the past in journalistic narrative is a constant quest to accord meaning to the present narrative, to connect-up, suggest inferences, create reference points with which to assess the impact of a given event and its magnitude, offer analogies and supply immediate explanations. It is very frequently precisely comparison with the past that makes news stories especially appealing. In this sense, for journalists the past is a decisive implicit backdrop to draw on to highlight foreground news reporting. In other words, for journalists the past is the most important knowledge store available to them to supply explanatory readings of the present (and future). It can thus, with Lang & Lang, be said that the past is the primary furnace in which public opinion is forged¹.

Journalism and collective trauma

An important part of journalistic narrative is based on traumatic events which the public is urgently seeking interpretative frameworks for. As has now been clearly demonstrated by trauma studies there is a powerful nexus between journalism, collective memory and collective trauma (Alexander et al., 2004; Meek, 2010). The tensions and critical issues feeding into the public debate which revolves around dramatic events is a reliable memory work generation indicator. The more controversial the events – such as disasters and catastrophes – the greater the recourse to journalistic memory and past narratives. Naturally this dialogue with the past is not always accurate. Quite the opposite. It can also be misleading and dangerous.

1 This fertile relationship is confirmed by the experience of Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) which recently (2012) set up an online service entirely devoted to past media which it coined the term *retronews* for. It is a website providing free access to 1500 printed items published from 1631 to 1950. *Retronews* is both a textbook digital consultation and archive space, a research tool and fully-fledged magazine – an opportunity to find out more about history via press archives – and, at the same time, a retrospective view of current events. It is important to stress that its magazine function is shored up by important social media action which makes it a full-blown media in its own right with over 134,000 Facebook and 12,000 Twitter followers.



Tab. 1: Covid-Spanish flu parallel

An important example of this distortion potential is the Coronavirus pandemic. Over these two years of Covid-19 pandemic one of the most commonplace parallel stories has been the Spanish flu epidemic, of which there were around 500 million cases in the 1918–20 period with estimates of deaths ranging from 10 to 50 million out of a population of around 2 billion. It is a death rate which qualifies it for the title of the most serious pandemic in the history of humanity. Deaths from the Spanish flu were effectively higher than those caused by the fourteenth century Black Death, though the general population figures were then much lower.

Whilst scientific doubt has been cast on the validity of this parallel it has been widely used in the journalistic sphere. In a systematic enquiry conducted from 1 January to 31 December 2020 relating to the *La Repubblica* newspaper, we found a grand total of 80 articles (more than one every five days) on the pandemic in which Sars-Cov-2 was presented together with the Spanish flu directly or indirectly (Tab. 1). The analysis shows that 15 of these (just under 20 %) put the two on a par, 33 (just over 40 %) brought up the 1918 experience when referring to the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting similarities and analogies and 28 (35 %) compared the two with a view to showing their common features. Lastly four of them brought up mild and generic similarities.

From an agenda setting mechanism standpoint (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the cultural interpretation framework proposed would seem to be based on a significant correlation between the two phenomena in which one of the two – the

Spanish flu – is presented as a reference benchmark in a situation which was entirely new for the bulk of public opinion.

From an anthropological standpoint all this is understandable, as human beings tend, in new situations, to feel the need to “anchor” their interpretation processes to something familiar by means of an analogue-type inferential process. What is much less understandable is the decision to found rational journalistic arguments on flawed or misleading heuristics. The danger of influencing readers in the direction of a misleading, even terrifying, interpretation of the phenomenon should have fostered journalistic caution. It is, however, well known that journalism is a selective narrative practice which reconstructs the facts on the basis of pragmatic models and tools which are also the basis for common sense (Sorrentino, 2002). This is a required process if it is to be made understandable to the public as a whole. It follows that such “unintentional distortions” (Wolf, 1985), however well-meaning they may sometimes be, are always lying in wait.

Memory, communication and digital media

Psycho-social research has demonstrated that communicative interaction is fundamentally important in reinforcing cognitive memory of elements in an event on the strength of selective repetition. In other words, fact memorisation is shored up when people speak. In a correlated and inverse way, information not shored up by communication is more likely to be forgotten, a phenomenon known as RIF, i.e. retrieval-induced forgetting (Anderson, Bjork & Bjork, 1994). These inter-personal cognitive phenomena are the foundations of “mnemonic convergence” which fosters widespread agreement within groups on events. The process is a strong one as it is an in-group one, an important issue given that a considerable proportion of people now also keeps up with the news on social media today and channels such as these are based on group membership. For this reason collective, public and social memories are increasingly significantly bound up with digital platform communication.

“Media metaphors” have always featured in thinking on the functions and characteristics of memory, from at least Plato onwards. It is now networks which seem to have the upper hand. It is a highly mediated and mediatised memory, one which is encapsulated and distributed across our socio-technical practices. The use of the web via interactive, so-called Web 2.0 services and platforms enables users to generate, configure and deploy biographical, biometric and identity-based information in a public or semi-public format, in real time and in a shared and interactive way. We can speak of a new digital network memory

emerging from communicative interactions which add, modify and cancel out a full-blown “living mnemonic archive” in a dynamic way.

Historically the media have shown an ability to “fix”² externalised human memory. The digital media, on the other hand, have new specificities worthy of attention. Aleida Assmann (2002) has identified two ways in which cultural memory works: (a) as an archive which accumulates texts, images and behavioural rules as a total horizon; (b) as current affairs which links objectified meaning with the specific contemporary context. Analysing the ways in which cultural memory accumulates in the communication context generated by digital technologies would seem to cast doubt on the binary nature of this textbook distinction, that is to say, the distinction between permanent and ephemeral, archive and narrative seems less solid and long-lasting (Hoskins, 2012). And all this as a result of the profound transformations ushered in by the advent of digital media which the academic literature has been analysing for some time, i.e. those relating to time frames, spatial considerations and mobility (Thompson, 1995), the principal categories on which the mnemonic process is founded (Di Pasquale, 2018). Hoskins (2018) speaks of an on-the-fly memory, a reconstructive version of memory in which tensions between traces of the past and current circumstances are played out. In fact, the web ensures an ultra-intense connection with the present but also, at the same time, an increasingly significant availability of historic and past materials as a cultural derivative of Anderson’s “long tail” theory (2006).

With the advent of digital technologies, the archive concept requires profound reconfiguration. In a society characterised by the hegemony of an allocutive model of information flows (Van Dijk, 1999), the traditional media and the traditional elite imposed a rigid and hierarchical order on archives in space, time, rhythm and content terms. The hegemony of the conversational model of information flows frees archives from allocutive institutional restrictions and gives it a fluid, transferable and reproducible form. In many ways these same archives become media, connected up in networks straddling the public and private, freed of time and space considerations. In this framework, the traditional distinction between living and archival memory is radically

2 The word “fixing” needs critical examination because, as Van Dijk specified (2007), even when the mnemonic process is shored up by external media it is always interactive, selective and creative and influenced by the very characteristics of the media used as a support as well. These latter should thus not be considered neutral. Furthermore, as Neisser has argued (2008), we must be careful to attribute memory properties inherent to media.

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questioned. The web does not – in contrast with TV, in all likelihood – generate an interweaving of past and present but rather a new networking and contemporary connectivity and data transfer essence. As Gitelman argued (2006), the web draws people in to reading, copying, pasting, modifying, updating and writing in a heterogeneous interpretational act context. Time is now evolving and constant, the opposite of the “punctuality” time frames of other media. The weakening of the distinction between the “past as past” and the “past as present” is especially evident precisely in the contemporary journalism field which generates “mnemonic work” through informational organisations with the most extensive available archives. To this we should add that, thanks to digital, all archives (as we saw with Repronews) have been affected by these processes, leading to the definitive erosion of the boundaries between professional and amateur journalism and the affirmation of so-called citizen-journalism (Maistrello, 2009).

Collective memory and misinformation

Today’s scholars are discussing the emergence of a new phenomenon straddling the individual and the collective, the public and the private: memory sharing within groups via the social media. Within this framework the question is: can misinformation shored up by the spreading of fake news distort memory and impact negatively on people’s perception of their future (Spinney, 2017)?

We have already shown that collective memory influences generational and group identities and impacts powerfully on the present. For illustrative purposes only, anthropologists Roediger and Wertsch (2008) showed that the American politicians debating the invasion of Iraq in the early noughties can be split into two groups: those who supported land invasion in the belief that Saddam Hussein had to be stopped just like Hitler before him, and those who opposed it, seeing it as a new bloody and interminable Vietnam. These were two diverse options informed by two opposing political orientations and supported by two historical precedents replete with significant symbolic implications. The same mechanism applies today to the Russia-Ukraine war and media comparisons with European appeasement at the time of the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany.

We know perfectly well that the fake news phenomenon is not a new one. It has a long history and the history of the mass media is literally packed with fake stories some of which are very striking. Its gatekeeping system, authoritative figures and professional practices are not absolute guarantees of the quality of the finished product. The academic literature has unequivocally demonstrated the weight of unintentional distortions resulting from the mass media’s

Iraq Unleashes Flood of Oil More Scud Missiles Strike Is

By Rick Atkinson and Dan Balz
Washington Post Staff Writers

Iraq has sabotaged a Kuwaiti supertanker terminal, dumping several million barrels of oil from ships and storage facilities into the Persian Gulf and creating an environmental disaster already several times larger than the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska, U.S. government officials said yesterday.

Military officials publicly insisted that the spill would not affect allied military operations in the Persian Gulf War, although planners privately said it could constrain options available for an amphibious assault. A visibly angry President Bush described the Iraqi action as a



Coated bird found off Kuwait, where oil is gushing from Sea Island Terminal.

stroyed most of the seven Scuds streaking toward Israel from western Iraq, but shrapnel spattered

building, killing one person and injuring about 30 others, Saudi officials said. Two more missiles fired

Pentagon spokesman Pete Wil the spill as "likely to dozen times bigger million gallons dum ka's Prince Willia years ago. By late vast oil slick, who began Wednesday southward at least oil was fouling the S

Crude oil is gushi Island Terminal ab the Kuwaiti coast, coming from stora the rest pumped tl pipes from five tar the occupied Kuwa al-Ahmadi.

Bush, who hudd ment experts and

Fig. 1: Article relating to the fake cormorant story during the First Gulf War

newsworthiness logics or a lack of oversight and controls, but also of intentionally misleading stories designed to further a specific political goal quite deliberately.

For illustrative purposes alone, note the recent example of mediatic events deliberately designed to influence public opinion in favour of the intervention of the US and its allies in Iraq and taken up and expanded upon by the most authoritative Western media (which then pointed the finger at itself in a dramatic mea culpa, like the New York Times): the fake testimony of 15-year-old Kuwaiti Nayirah; fake images of cormorants black as pitch and soaked in petroleum dying in the slimy waters of the Persian Gulf (Fig. 1); the Kuwait City invasion scenes filmed in American film studios (Fracassi, 1994) and so on³.

If, however, fake news are not entirely new, neither can the discontinuity with the past be underestimated. It is all bound up with the characteristics of web 2.0 information and the way it is used. Fake news channelled by the traditional media is founded on the authoritative nature of the media itself and the social

3 All this was orchestrated by the Hill & Knowlton public relations agency which played a fundamentally important part in propaganda activities via the constant production of information and materials (videos, press releases, etc.) channelled through an association, *Astro Turf*, called *Citizens for a Free Kuwait* and then frequently filmed by the press.

credit it enjoys. In the case of the social media, this power lies in the “social physics” (Pentland) fostered by the disintermediation digital platforms feed off (Morozov, 2016), namely sharing within communities of practices (Lave & Wenger, 2006) which establish them as “situated social facts” (Riva, 2018) reinforced by echo-chamber type mirroring and reverberation (Garrett, 2017).

A further factor with a significant impact is use methods. As we know this takes place mainly via smartphone and this means limited attention, rapidity of use, superficiality and multitasking. These are all conditions which reduce users’ critical ability. Lastly, an important role is played by algorithm sources with their targeting-driven models and their trolls and bots. In a powerfully cyber-fragmentation-affected framework (Paccagnella, 2018) even debunking and fact-checking, however useful and valuable they may be, are not always effective. Quite the opposite, they can sometimes be seen as counter-productive, as a result of what is known as the backfire effect (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Fake news: An ambiguous concept?

Scientific research has shown that exposure to constructed stories can generate false memories (Frenda et al., 2013; O’Connell & Greene, 2017; Polage, 2012), above all when these accord with the political views and values of those subject to them (Murphy et al., 2019). Fake memories can, in turn, generate significant behavioural consequences (Laney & Loftus, 2016). In the light of this evidence, there is no doubt that the “fluidity” of digital information and the risks bound up with its manipulation constitute a serious cause for concern⁴.

However, the fake-news concept⁵ remains suffused with a considerable amount of ambiguity. For these three reasons: one a matter of academic definition, one more strictly political and one entirely philosophical. In definition terms, for example, Molina et al. (2021) have identified as many as seven different types of online content which might be encompassed under the fake-news umbrella term. One of the most elusive of these is so-called “facticity”, clearly a fundamental characteristic by which the factual basis of information is recognised.

4 For example, it is striking that, at least until 2010, an online community shared a firm “memory” of Nelson Mandela dying in prison in the 1980s despite the fact that we all know that he left prison in 1990 and died in 2013, after being the first black prime minister of South Africa (Spinney, 2017).

5 The definition of fake news used here is a false story resembling news which is disseminated on the internet or other media generally with the intention of influencing political opinion or for other motives which may or may not be entertainment related.

However, in reference to breaking news on events as they develop and on which no previous information is available it can be problematical. Source authoritativeness may be of assistance in this, as we have seen, but this is not a 100 % guarantee. Just as, by contrast, certain non-official sources are not necessarily to be considered unreliable.

Secondly, it should be remembered that political players have irremediably polarised the concept in semantic terms, using it indiscriminately to discredit adversaries and any sources disagreeing with them. This politicisation has made it a sort of byword with which to discredit any sources opposed to one's own position. Lastly, it should be said that in epistemological terms classifying certain contents or part of them as fake is an uphill task. Doing so implies an idea of a universal and unanimous truth on the reading of events which is difficult to achieve (Southwell et al., 2017).

Furthermore, there is no unanimity amongst experts around any definition of the boundaries of what might be conceptualised as “fake news”. For example, although the term has been used to describe contents in the sphere of satirical entertainment, this is a highly controversial issue. Even the intentionality theme has been the subject of heated debate. For some, for example, partially or entirely fake news channelled unintentionally by the mainstream media via the application of the “newsworthiness criteria” should be excluded from it. A further critical aspect relates to its generally binary classification nature (true/false). However, today, a considerable proportion of professional fact-checking sites prefer to use a wide ranging continuum concept (containing up to twelve categories: false, partially false, true, mainly true, etc.).

Taking these considerations duly into account it is possible, though challenging, to define manifestly false news and undoubtedly true news via inter-lacing analysis of:

- (a) message content and linguistic structure;
- (b) source quality and intentions;
- (c) structural characteristics of the channel;
- (d) networking and sharing characteristics.

However, in order to avert dangerous constraints on freedom of expression and fundamental rights of users to express their opinions, as well as journalistic efforts to inform, identifying the numerous intermediate forms is crucial. Just as the independence of the actors involved in debunking would seem to be increasingly important. It is a matter which came through increasingly forcefully in the case of the funding by the pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer of the International

Center For Journalists (ICFJ), a professional body which also trains Facebook's fact checkers.

Official memory, social memories: The digital media from risk to opportunity

The symbolic transmission of community allegiance is built on a putative past, a tradition. The past is used in various ways as if it were a resource. In fact,

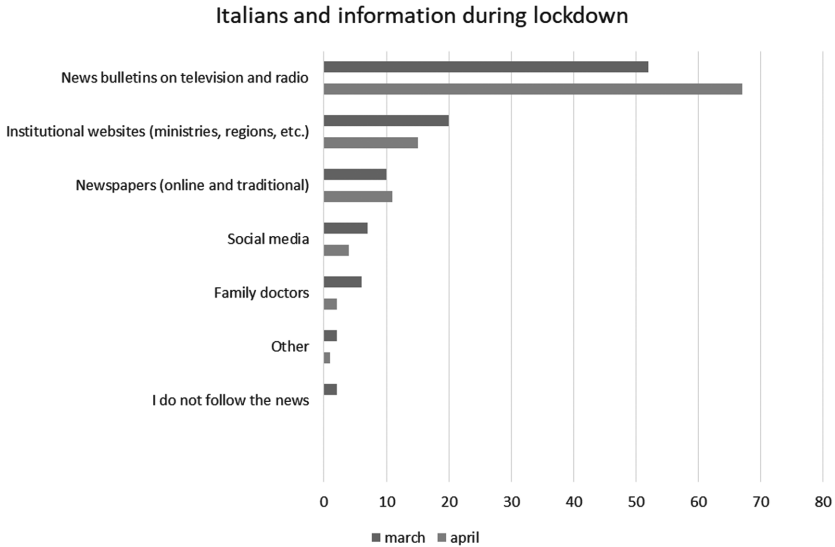
The manner in which the past is invoked is strongly indicative of the kinds of circumstance which makes such a 'past-reference' salient. It is a selective construction of the past which resonates with contemporary influences (Cohen, 1985, p. 99)

Whilst the symbolic-identity narrative generally aims to over represent the collective memory's homogeneity, coherence and internal harmony it is actually only rarely a monolithic entity. The existence of the community depends on the power of official and institutional symbols and memory with selective re-elaborations designed to create functional, legitimising frameworks. It can also make use of memories as a tool in the struggle against political opponents or to legitimise specific power aspirations. *Damnatio memoriae* is a historical reconstruction constant in the collective memory (Wynter, 1998).

However, whilst a social group can share the same knowledge of past events, collective memory is ultimately always divided in its interpretations. There is a gap between the accepted version of the past, the past conserved in the archives and under-reported versions. These latter play no part in event commemoration and express no capacity to forge memories. This is especially decisive in the official definition of catastrophe memories as Kaspersky brilliantly demonstrated (2012) in reference to the Chernobyl nuclear tragedy.

Within this framework, the web and the digital media are a great potential resource. Once again experience has interesting emergency-context case studies to offer us. In fact, here what is known as citizen journalism is motivated by the desire to define alternative narratives to counteract those supplied by the traditional media, the desire to document the "real" condition of the places affected, the need to find something with which to restore broken bonds (Farinosi, 2020).

The risk-opportunity relationship is thus not necessarily weighted in favour of the former, as the case of the Coronavirus significantly demonstrates. In a recent analysis conducted during the first wave of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic (March-May 2020) we found that the risk of fake news – stressed by virtually all commentators – remained within reasonably tolerable limits. The Bruno Kessler Foundation has shown that this risk dropped from 30 to 5 % in the space of just



Graph 1: Italians and information during lockdown (Source: Observa: <https://www.observa.it/>)

a few days after the Covid outbreak, a figure which has been confirmed by the analysis of Gallotti et al. (2020). This study created an *Infodemic Risk Index* to gain an insight into the breadth of the risk of exposure to non-reliable information sources in the various countries (a grand total of 163). Published in *Nature*, this research shows that as case numbers grew so did the dominance of reliable information on social media.

A further enquiry by *Observa* in Italy during the first wave supplies extremely interesting data capable of supplying an overview of the situation which was less obvious than expected. In the March to May 2020 period the vast majority of Italians preferred to use traditional media as their preferred source of information – as is generally the case during emergency situations (Graph 1). Only very few Italians stated a preference for social media as their source of information (6.8 % in March and 4.2 % in April).

Contrary to commonly held beliefs it would, in fact, seem to have been precisely the traditional media (TV and traditional and digital newspapers) which acted as the main source of information on the pandemic for the country (Ferrazzoli & Maga, 2022). In the absence of expert “institutional direction” (required in an emergency context), information was primarily “managed” by

the traditional media (77 % radio, TV and newspapers in April). Coverage was large-scale, emphatic and schizophrenic (alternating reassurance with alarmism). Sometimes the media even “played dirty” with high impact titles and only partially true news. There is nothing accidental about the fact that the communications ombudsman authorities, AGCOM, issued an official reprimand to the audio-visual and radio broadcasting services providers as early as March 2020. Ambiguous institutional communications – not always distinct from political communications – with their contradictory and seesawing between downplaying and alarmism certainly did not help (Nicolosi, 2021).

Events surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war have brought up similar issues:

- (a) risk of information overload;
- (b) risk of spectacularised and emotive information narrating tragic real life events on the basis of images and plots built around structures leaving extremely small margins for critical, in-depth analysis;
- (c) risk of excessive rapidity in source assessment processes and checks.

This latter is an extremely important issue because this is the first war in the social platform and globalised information era. This dismediated hyper-production of images and news has prompted the traditional media to resort to less trustworthy sources⁶.

Conclusions

As we have seen, journalism has always been a fundamentally important resource for collective memory “production”. The media will increasingly be an archive source on the past of great social significance. The RAI archives in Italy and those of the BBC in Britain are crucial historical and mnemonic patrimonies. Conserving and looking after these should be a cultural priority for the two countries⁷. Journalistic memory is increasingly at risk of serious distortion and manipulation. Today, following on from advanced information and communication

6 As happened on a few occasions with RAI, which used fake images to comment real, dramatic wartime events.

7 The scope of the collective memory sustained by media archives (traditional and digital) issue naturally goes well beyond mere journalistic production. A significant case is BBC “censorship”, as reported by certain conservative American and French journals long critical of what they call “cancel culture”. According to these observers, without making it public, the BBC censored its archives, modifying the contents of certain past broadcasts to bring them into line with contemporary social attitudes.

digitalisation processes, these risks have not, in all likelihood, increased but they have certainly changed significantly. The disintermediation of information production fostered by social platforms should be paid the utmost attention.

In this context fake news are certainly problematic but the impression given is that this is only partly due to the intrinsic characteristics specific to digital platform communications. Clues have emerged indicating that the problem is a key piece in a wider critical jigsaw bound up with the radicalisation of the competitive commodification process and consequent emotive spectacularisation of newsmaking. These are both processes traceable to worsening media and information provision standards (Attali, 2021). This makes for a challenge which must be dealt with across the media board. Cross-mediality is, in fact, our era's true distinctive feature: the traditional media are trailing the social media and the latter feed off the former in an interplay which frequently works against the emergence of careful, considered, critical and rational thought. This frenetic and hyper-rapid framework is an ideal breeding ground for fake news, with consequent distorting effects on perceptions of reality with harmful effects on collective memory conservation.

This paper has also attempted to show that the digital media are not simply a risk but also an opportunity. In this case, too, analysing the way catastrophes are remembered may serve as a paradigm. Ando Gilardi, founder of Fototeca storica nazionale, has written that the most important archived and restored images in his life, those most relevant to finding out the truth on human affairs, have been by unknown photographers, amateurs guided purely by a heroic passion. Gilardi loved to call these the Unknown Photographers, witnesses accorded no glory or credit to history, death and the collective conscience (Gilardi, 2008). Gilardi was referring here, first and foremost, to traditional photography. However, as a man of the twentieth century he sensed the power of the digital media to enlarge this "spontaneous testimony" dimension of memory: the ability to hunt down and capture pieces of truth of fundamental, and also tragic, importance encapsulated in the banality and randomness of everyday life.

In this sense we can certainly affirm that the digital media are a great opportunity for our societies. It is naturally up to us to grasp this opportunity from amidst the many associated risks which must inevitably be avoided or managed.

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