

## CALL FOR PAPERS: “Fake news, misinformation/disinformation, post-truth”.

### Versus, journal of Semiotics and Philosophy of Language

The international journal *Versus* (or *VS*, as is often known) is preparing a thematic issue about fake-news, misinformation/disinformation and post-truth. *Versus* is a Semiotic journal, dealing also with Theory and Philosophy of language, and it was founded in 1971 by Umberto Eco, who has been its director until February 2016. *Versus* is currently directed by Patrizia Violi. Further information about the journal at [http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/riv1\\_en.php](http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/riv1_en.php)

#### BACKGROUND

Since 2016 fake news have emerged as one of the main concerns of public debate in Western democracies. According to many political and philosophical theories, free and fair discussion is at the very heart of modern liberal societies; this necessary condition can be undermined by two different (but often connected) factors: bad (i.e. irrational or unreasonable) argumentations and false information used as premises. According to many media and experts we have now reached a warning level and fake news have suddenly become a public enemy: foreign countries have been suspected of organized disinformation actions during electoral campaigns and influential newspapers have begun, as never before, to list the alleged lies of important politicians (as *The New York Times* has done with Donald Trump and *Le Monde* with Marine Le Pen).

Actually, it is quite indisputable that fake news have always existed. In 1921 Marc Bloch wrote a short article about the “fausse nouvelles de la guerre” (the false news of war); but before and after Bloch, this issue has been at stake for a long time: as it has been recently reminded in Italy by Raffaele Simone (2017), false information and lies have been debated, among others, by Constant and Kant (“Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen”, 1797), by Hannah Arendt (1968, 1972) and by Jacques Derrida (2002), who outlined a short history of the “pseudology”, or of the philosophical reflection about lie.

Nevertheless, in recent years these phenomena seem to have gained growing attention from public opinion. From a technological and sociological point of view the (possible) increased influence of fake news has been explained, for instance, by the dramatically increased possibility for everyone to create and spread contents via social media; or (a not necessarily alternative explanation) by the growing mistrust in traditional social institutions, such as the political apparatus, the media system and, finally, modern science (as shown by the anti-vaccination movement). Sociologists are working to map and describe ways in which disinformation and misinformation are spread and amplified and to understand if and how they can be contrasted and corrected:

these studies concern above all social media and how mis/dis-information circulate through social networks (intended as networks of people).

#### RELEVANCE FOR SEMIOTICS AND PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

A different approach, closer to Semiotics and Philosophy of Language, is also possible and probably useful. After all, Umberto Eco (1976) proposed a definition of semiotics as the study of what can be used to lie; Eco (1998), again, studied one of the most tragic and known fakes of Western culture, the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and also proposed an analytical definition of the different kinds of “fakes and forgeries” in a thematic issue of *Versus* (n. 46, 1987) dealing with “Fake, Identity and the Real Thing” (Eco 1987).

Our disciplines can provide a critical point of view and a more general reflection that can redefine some aspects of the discussion about fake news and post-truth. First of all, current academic and media debate is dominated by a bunch of concepts not always clearly defined. What really is post-truth? Is it an aspect of a more general phenomenon? Or is it an umbrella term which hides a knot of more specific concepts? Which are the differences among fake news, misinformation, disinformation, etc.? Terminology and definitions are so confused that in April 2017 Facebook staff tried to make some clarification, substituting the expression “fake news” with “false news” and proposing one of the first systematic (even if not widely accepted) reflections on the issue (Weedon, Nuland and Stamos 2017). From another point of view, journalists, more than academics, have recently begun to propose taxonomies trying to describe these phenomena (see, for instance, Wardle 2017).

Secondly, using terms such as “fake” or “false” implies some idea of truth and some criterion to recognize it. Of course, this is a not at all obvious issue in Philosophy. We can go from a “hard” conception of facts (that of the external realism) to its opposite, such as some nihilist positions according to which there are no facts, but only interpretations. Between these extremes, there are a continuous of different conceptions of facts, such as the consensual one adopted by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) in their “Treatise of Argumentation”, where the status of “fact” depends only on the consensus of a specific audience. In Semiotics, this problem has also been treated by Greimas and his school, for whom the question of truth is not a matter of correspondence with reality, but an effect produced by the text. This idea has further been developed in the so called “square of veridiction” (Greimas 1983), which leads us to another important aspect when we deal with fake news and post-truth: the trust we have in the source of the message and how it can be built or strengthened or weakened by the text and the context. In addition, independently from this academic dispute, journalists have long time ago accepted a difference between the “absolute truth” (whatever it is) and the “journalistic truth”, that can be defined – in the words of the world-known reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward – as “the best obtainable version of the truth”.

Another aspect of post-truth and fake-news that must be probably more deeply discussed is their textual nature. "Fake news" are texts (in the more traditional and "classic" semiotic sense). As such, they can be analyzed on different layers, they can show narrative structures and rhetorical mechanisms. Are there recurrent schemas in fake news? Can we recognize sub-genres among them? Can qualitative analysis help to recognize them and to improve detection algorithms?

## TOPICS

Proposed papers should present either empirical work or theoretical reflections about fake news, misinformation/disinformation, post-truth with a Semiotics and/or Philosophy of Language approach.

This is a (non-exhaustive) list of possible topics:

- 1) Theoretical aspects of the semiotic and philosophical thought about truth, reference, facts and interpretations.
- 2) Taxonomies and definitions of the different kinds of fake news and of misinformation/disinformation actions or of other key-concepts involved in the debate about post-truth and fake news.
- 3) Rhetoric, narrative, discursive aspects and text analyses of fake news and misinformation/disinformation, not necessarily limited to verbal language (for instance, fake news as visual, audiovisual or syncretic texts...)
- 4) Truth and trust as an effect of text, context and circumstances.
- 5) Semiotic relations among post-truth, fake news, misinformation/disinformation and other textual and cultural phenomena, such as virality and conspiracy theories.

## SUBMISSION AND DEADLINES

All papers will undergo double-blind peer review, preceded by a preliminary editorial review of the abstracts.

Deadlines:

- December 30<sup>th</sup> 2017: submission of an abstract no longer than 500 words (plus a bibliography and a short biography)
- January 15<sup>th</sup> 2018: notification of abstract acceptance or refusal
- April 30<sup>th</sup> 2018: full paper submission

Abstract and papers must be sent to [p.polidoro@lumsa.it](mailto:p.polidoro@lumsa.it) AND [redazione.vs@gmail.com](mailto:redazione.vs@gmail.com)

## ACCEPTED LANGUAGES

- English (preferred); publishing style guide at [http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/VS\\_guidelines\\_ENG.pdf](http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/VS_guidelines_ENG.pdf)
- Italian; publishing style guide at [http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/VS\\_criteriredazionali.pdf](http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/VS_criteriredazionali.pdf)

## INVITED AUTHORS

These invited authors have already accepted to send a contribution:

- Prof. George Lakoff
- Prof. John Searle

## ISSUE EDITOR

- Piero Polidoro

## References

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