

The COVID-19 pandemic, fake news, and the social bond of cybermasses

A pandemia da COVID-19, as fake news e o laço social das cibermassas

La pandemia de la COVID-19, las fake news y el lazo social de las ciber masas

La pandémie de la COVID-19, les fake news et le lien social des cybermasses

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Abstract

In a piece of fake news about the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Twitter user (“@Thaclaroquina”) identified herself in May 2020 as “Catholic, conservative, anti-left, and Bolsonaro’s robot with a CPF [Brazilian Individual Taxpayer Registry].” “Robot with a CPF” appears to unequivocally symbolize a phenomenon that characterizes contemporary society: subjective alienation within the mediatized social bond in the cyberterritories of social media, fueled by fake news. This article reports the research process and its main observations in examining the economy of the fake news phenomenon, revealing markers of subjectivation and intersubjectivation in digitality. The hypothesis is that, within the contingencies of the “post-factual” era, fake news functions as a factor in the formation of social bonds, giving rise to what are termed “cybermasses” and bringing into the 21st century a phenomenon with a long historical trajectory. The study corpus comprised 62 fact-checks of false news about the novel coronavirus pandemic conducted by Projeto Comprova, a collaborative journalism initiative that investigates “false” or “misleading” content that goes viral on social media. The analyses were guided by the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, particularly Sigmund Freud’s so-called “social texts,” as well as by the literature on social communication.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, COVID-19, pandemic, fake news, cybermasses.

Resumo

Em uma fake news acerca da extensão da pandemia da COVID-19, uma usuária do Twitter “(@Thaclaroquina)”, em maio de 2020, identificou-se como “católica, conservadora, anti-esquerda e robô do Bolsonaro com CPF”. “Robô com CPF” parece ser a simbolização inequívoca de um fenômeno que marca a contemporaneidade: a alienação subjetiva ao laço social mediatizado nos ciberterritórios das redes sociais, dinamizados por fake news. Este artigo relata o percurso e as principais observações de uma pesquisa para averiguar a economia do fenômeno das notícias falsas, desvelando marcas da subjetivação e da intersubjetivação na digitalidade. A hipótese é a de que, na contingência da era “pós-fática”, as fake news se constituem como fatores de enlaços sociais, conformando o que se nomeia de “cibermassas”, atualizando, ao século XXI, um fato de extensa paginação histórica. Como corpus de estudo, foram selecionadas 62 (sessenta e duas) averiguações de notícias falsas sobre a pandemia do novo coronavírus, feitas pelo “Projeto Comprova”, iniciativa de jornalismo colaborativo que investiga conteúdos “falsos” ou “enganosos” que viralizam nas redes. As análises se guiaram pelo referencial teórico da psicanálise, em especial pelos chamados “textos sociais” de Sigmund Freud, além disso, pela literatura da comunicação social.

Palavras-chave: psicanálise, COVID-19, pandemia, fake news, cibermassas.

Resumen

En una fake news acerca de la extensión de la pandemia de la COVID-19, una usuaria de Twitter (“@Thacloroquina”), en mayo de 2020, se identificó como “católica, conservadora, anti izquierda y robot de Bolsonaro con CPF”. “Robot con CPF” parece constituir la simbolización inequívoca de un fenómeno que marca la contemporaneidad: la alienación subjetiva al lazo social mediatizado en los Ciber territorios de las redes sociales, dinamizados por fake news. Este artículo presenta el recorrido y las principales observaciones de una investigación destinada a examinar la economía del fenómeno de las noticias falsas, revelando marcas de subjetivación e intersubjetivación en la digitalidad. La hipótesis sostiene que, en la contingencia de la era “post- fáctica”, las fake news se constituyen como factores de vínculos sociales, configurando lo que se denomina “Ciber masas”, actualizando para el siglo XXI un fenómeno de extensa trayectoria histórica. Como corpus de estudio, se seleccionaron 62 (sesenta y dos) verificaciones de noticias falsas sobre la pandemia del nuevo coronavirus, realizadas por el “Projeto Comprova”, iniciativa de periodismo colaborativo que investiga contenidos “falsos” o “engañosos” que se viralizan en las redes. Los análisis se orientaron por el referencial teórico del psicoanálisis, en especial por los llamados “textos sociales” de Sigmund Freud, además de la literatura de la comunicación social.

Palabras clave: psicoanálisis, COVID-19, pandemia, fake news, ciber masas.

Résumé

Dans une fake news sur l'ampleur de la pandémie de COVID-19, une utilisatrice de Twitter « (@Thacloroquina) », en mai 2020, s'est identifiée comme « catholique, conservatrice, anti-gauche et robot de Bolsonaro avec un CPF ». « Robot avec CPF » semble être la symbolisation sans équivoque d'un phénomène qui marque la contemporanéité : l'aliénation subjective au lien social médiatisé dans les cyberterritoires des réseaux sociaux, dynamisés par fake news. Cet article retrace le parcours et les principales observations d'une recherche visant à examiner l'économie du phénomène des fausses nouvelles, en dévoilant des marques de la subjectivation et de l'intersubjectivation dans la digitalité. L'hypothèse est que, dans le contexte de l'ère « post-factuelle », les fake news constituent des facteurs de lien social, configurant ce que l'on appelle des « cyber masses », actualisant, au XXI^e siècle, un fait d'une vaste pagination historique. Comme corpus d'étude, 62 (soixante-deux) enquêtes sur des fausses nouvelles concernant la pandémie du nouveau coronavirus, menées par le « Projeto Comprova », une initiative de journalisme collaboratif qui enquête sur des contenus « faux » ou « trompeurs » devenus viraux sur les réseaux sociaux, ont été sélectionnées. Les analyses se sont appuyées sur le cadre théorique de la psychanalyse, en particulier sur les « textes sociaux » de Sigmund Freud, ainsi que sur la littérature en sciences de la communication.

Mots-clés : psychanalyse, COVID-19, pandémie, fake news, cibermasses.

Modernity (Bobbio et al., 2002) established facts and factuality as foundations for a wide range of social bonds, from economics to science. A specific narrative form was even created for the dissemination of factual information: the news. In the 19th century, news writing also provided the foundation for the development of a distinct social field (Bourdieu, 1997): journalism.

The contemporary era, also referred to as “postmodernity” (Jameson, 2000), has introduced new developments into the realm of social bonds by establishing “alternative facts,” which underpin what has been termed the “post-truth era” or “post-factual era” (Gabriel, 2022). In this context, the text that shapes sociocultural, economic, and political perceptions has come to be known as fake news (or false news) which, by mimicking the narrative conventions of the long-established news genre, seeks, through similarity, to appropriate its symbolic discursive authority.

Under the mantle of rationality and scientism, facts and factual news, disseminated through journalism, have mobilized Western civilization over the past centuries. In contemporary society, particularly within cyberterritories, “alternative facts” and fake news have increasingly functioned as social aggregators. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic stood at the epicenter of the fake news agenda.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic: “The term ‘pandemic’ refers to the geographic spread of a disease and not to its severity.” In doing so, the WHO acknowledged the existence of “COVID-19 outbreaks in several countries and regions of the world” (Câmara Municipal de Barra do Rocha, 2022).

On March 11, 2022, two years into the pandemic (a date that also marks the end of the corpus analyzed in this article) approximately 500 million people worldwide had been infected, and 6 million deaths had been recorded, according to the WHO (Nações Unidas Brasil, 2022). In Brazil, the Ministry of Health reported, also on March 11, 2022, that the country had recorded “654,086 deaths from COVID-19 and 29,249,903 cases of the novel coronavirus” (Ministério da Saúde, n.d.).

Against this backdrop, a study by Avaaz (2020)¹ demonstrates the prevalence of fake news and its impact on perceptions and behaviors. The survey indicates that, even during the first months of the global tragedy, nine out of ten Brazilians had received at least one piece of false information about the novel coronavirus, and seven out of ten had believed at least one piece of content based on misinformation about the disease. Avaaz defined misinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information that has the potential to cause public harm, such as undermining democracy or harming public health.” In this article, the term fake news is used in accordance with its literal meaning in English, i.e., “false news,” given that, partly because of the novelty of the signifier itself, there is no conceptual consensus regarding the term.

It is worth emphasizing that Brazil experienced the critical years of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the period analyzed in this study, under the administration of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019–2022). He disseminated fake news and denialist claims, as observed in the present analysis.

“I’m not a gravedigger.” This and other public remarks made by then-President Jair Bolsonaro when confronted about the actions of the Executive Branch and pandemic-related mortality came to symbolize the performance of the Brazilian government at the time.

The militarization of the Ministry of Health, anti-science rhetoric, vehement criticism of WHO recommendations (mask wearing, social distancing, etc.), obstacles to the implementation of vaccination, and recommendations of treatments lacking scientific evidence, among other actions championed by Bolsonaro, made the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 in Brazil even more dramatic and severe.

These were perverse political attitudes and discourses—insofar as they were at odds with reality. They emerged within the context of the politicization of the public health crisis according to the tenets of the far right, a form of extremism that has spread across the globe and of which Jair Bolsonaro is one of its most prominent exponents.

The corrosion of democracy and erosion of the social fabric are part of this political current, which is also driven by scientific denialism and the rejection of factual truth as a social bond relevant to republican citizenship and human dignity.

In an analysis of this phenomenon that includes Bolsonaro’s Brazil, Harari (2024, p. 348) argues that “when citizens can no longer talk to one another and when they see one another as enemies rather than political rivals, democracy becomes unsustainable.”

Discussing Bolsonaro supporters and other groups, Harari further observes: “In its more radical versions, populism holds that there are no objective truths and that everyone has ‘their own truth,’ which they wield to defeat rivals. According to this worldview, power is the only reality.” These “personal truths” lie at the heart of the formation of cybermasses organized around fake news, as investigated in this study.

Method and research process

From the perspective of Freud’s “social texts” and grounded in psychoanalytic theory, the study was structured to provide an interpretation of the fake news phenomenon, encompassing aspects of both its historical contingencies and its media-based constitution (narrative, circulation, resources, etc.), within the context of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The investigation followed the inductive method, which, according to Marconi and Lacatos (2010, p. 68), “is a mental process through which, starting from sufficiently established particular data, a general or universal truth is inferred.” Documentary and bibliographic research techniques were employed. Documentary research draws on “written or unwritten sources, primary or secondary sources, contemporary or retrospective” (Marconi & Lacatos, 2010, p. 159). Bibliographic research, in turn, “encompasses bibliography that has already been made public concerning the topic under study” (Marconi & Lacatos, 2010, p. 166).

The object of study comprised fact-checks of content classified as “misleading” and “false” conducted by Projeto Comprova (Projeto Comprova, n.d.). This collaborative journalism initiative, comprising 40 Brazilian news organizations, investigates the veracity of suspicious narratives that go viral on digital social media, including content related to COVID-19. Over the two-year period from its first fact-check, conducted on March 25, 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, through March 25, 2022, by which time vaccines had become available and restrictions were being eased, Projeto Comprova conducted approximately 344 fact-checks of false and misleading pandemic-related content that had circulated widely on social media.

For this study, the sample comprised fact-checks from the months with the greatest circulation of fake news in each year included in the study period: May 2020 (25 pieces of misinformation), June 2021 (22), and February 2022 (15). Overall, 62 pieces of content were analyzed, covering the “outbreak,” “vaccination,” and “waning” phases of the pandemic.

The analysis of this corpus sought to answer the following questions: What does fake news discourse offer that enables it to go viral on digital social media? What is distinctive about the narrative that brings people together through social bonds within the cyberterritoriality of digital social media? Accordingly, the purpose was to identify the foundations, characteristics (media/platforms used; classifications such as “misleading/false”; key and associated signifiers; conceptions

¹ For the purposes of this article, all direct quotations from the original sources have been translated into English.

of bonding; disseminator; enunciator; and measured engagement), intentions, and discursive strategies of fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic in order to develop an understanding of the economy of fake news as an agent of mass formation within contemporary mediatized sociability.

The hypothesis is that the viral spread of fake news across cyberterritories represents a new mechanism for mass formation, updating a phenomenon common throughout historical processes. Contemporary society would thus be witnessing the formation of mediatized masses, or cybermasses, amalgamated around enunciators and/or fake news narratives. Fake news would therefore constitute a gregarious mechanism by providing unequivocal answers and positions at a time characterized by the declining prestige of the rational-scientific paradigm, informational vertigo, and a sense of helplessness intensified by neoliberal ethics and the tragedy of a deadly pandemic. From this perspective, fake news would facilitate the manipulation of various affects, such as fear, love, and hatred, thereby functioning as a galvanizing force for mediatized masses. It would operate as a factor promoting group cohesion amid the vertiginous perception of structural helplessness under the contingencies of this mediatized “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2021), which, at the time, was also affected by a pandemic.

The study of the fake news phenomenon is essential to understanding an era marked by the breakdown of the paradigms that organized modernity, as well as the foundations of contemporary social bonds, notably permeated by radicalism, extremism, and intolerance, particularly within cyberterritories. This relevance becomes even greater in a period marked by mortality on a global scale caused by an unknown virus.

This article begins by discussing the era of post-truth and fake news, with particular emphasis on the context of the corpus under study, namely, the cyberterritories of mediatized society. It then analyzes fake news about the pandemic according to the methodological framework adopted. Finally, it discusses the hypothesis concerning the constitution of mediatized masses, amalgamated around fake news.

Post-truth, fake news, and cyberterritories

Factuality, which played a central role in organizing social bonds in modernity, including through the invention and popularization of news, currently faces the historical rivalry of “alternative facts,” which mobilize the so-called “post-truth era” and its fake news. D’Ancona (2018, p. 92) emphasizes that the “rise of [factual] truth as a cohesive force in scientific, legal, political, and commercial activity was a gradual and hard-won achievement.” Poovey (1998) examines the establishment of facts as a turning point in the history of knowledge production, locating this development in modernity, which was indelibly shaped by its emergence. Drawing on documents collected between the 16th and 19th centuries, the researcher seeks to identify processes aimed at separating factuality (description, particularly numerical description) from theorization (interpretation) through the formalization of facts as verifiable and credible evidence capable of structuring a wide range of social bonds.

Within this context, Sodr  (2009) articulates the relationship between fact and news. The author defines fact as a “concept” pertaining to objects and phenomena “whose reality can be proven—and, therefore, as a space available to the observer for attributing some meaning to an occurrence” (p. 28). Drawing on a longstanding logical understanding, he states: “True, therefore, will be the statement that agrees with reality (i.e., that is capable of logically and linguistically representing something)” (p. 30). Invented in the mid-19th century, “journalistic information takes as its point of departure objects primarily regarded as factual in order to obtain [...] some clarity about the sociohistorical fact” (Sodr , 2009, p. 32), with the aim of producing a discourse recognized as truthful and capable of generating the social bonds so valued by modernity.

Within the sociability shaped by news and anchored in factuality, Zelizer (1992) observes the emergence of a perspective that assigned journalists the role of trusted spokespersons for the events and facts of “real life.” This gave rise to a form of cultural authority exercised by journalists, or so-called “journalistic authority,” particularly through news narratives, which came to be regarded as legitimate interpretations of the world.

However, modernity, with its world organized around the production of facts and their narration through news, encountered a new frontier at the turn of the millennium, which Bauman (2021) terms “liquid modernity.” The metaphor of liquidity “seeks to capture the nature of the present phase in the history of modernity. [...] Liquids, unlike solids, do not easily retain their shape” (p. 8), he argues.

Within the “liquid” sociability of modernity’s pervasive crisis, the antithesis of the fact/news dyad emerges. The “post-truth era” is characterized by the prominence of “alternative facts” and the narratives that produce networked media events: fake news. These narratives mimic journalistic texts (headlines, leads, highly shareable narratives, quotations from authorities, supplementary evidence, etc.), seeking to appropriate journalism’s credibility and narrative authority as a bearer of factual truths (Zelizer, 1992). In this sense, fake news fuels the post-truth era, defined by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016 as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (D’Ancona, 2018, p. 20).

A decade before “post-truth” entered dictionaries, Han (2022) traced the origins of the crisis of factual truth in contemporary civilization to 2005, when “the New York Times chose the neologism truthiness as one of the words capturing the Zeitgeist. Truthiness, something akin to ‘felt truth,’ reflects the crisis of truth.” He adds: “It refers to a truth that is

felt but lacks all objectivity, all solidity of facts. The subjective arbitrariness that distinguishes it abolishes truth” (p. 86). Kakutani (2018, p. 10) describes the present as marked by a “disregard for facts, the replacement of reason by emotion, and the corrosion of language.” For D’Ancona (2018, p. 90), “the epistemology of post-truth urges us to accept that there are ‘incommensurable realities’ and that prudent conduct consists of choosing sides rather than evaluating evidence.”

The “incommensurable” cyberterritories of digital social media, an invention that has marked the beginning of this millennium, constitute the privileged locus of the post-truth era, whose narratives are grounded in “alternative facts,” namely, fake news. According to Sodr  (2014), this existential dimension is part of a new mode of presence in the world, a mediatized ethos with its “continent of bytes,” giving rise to what are termed cyberterritories.

The “materiality” of these cyberterritories consists of webs of dialogic information networks activated and energized by multiple interests within an environment narratively constituted through worldwide computational interconnection (Martinuzzo, 2016). Subjectivities and intersubjectivities affectively drive informational connections within these cyberterritories, establishing multidirectional communication links and thereby shaping digital spaces constituted through the symbolic elaborations that weave life itself, i.e., cyberterritorialities.

In concise terms, according to Recuero (2009, p. 24), digital social media, a central technology in the formation of contemporary cyberterritories, “is defined as a set of two elements: actors (people, institutions, or groups; the nodes of the network) and their connections (interactions or social bonds).” Examples include YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram, among others.

Regarding the relationship between humanity and technology, Freud (1930/2010, p. 52) observed that “human beings have become, so to speak, a kind of prosthetic god, truly admirable when they put on all their auxiliary organs; but these have not grown together with them and occasionally still cause them considerable trouble.” With regard to the problems associated with technological prostheses, it is worth recalling that cyberterritories are privately owned spaces designed to generate profit, employing strategies to capture users’ attention and monetize it in advertising and marketing markets, including electoral contexts. It is within this setting that new masses, or cybermasses, are formed, amalgamated through fake news in the mediatized post-truth era.

Fake news and the pandemic on digital networks

As highlighted in the Introduction, 62 fake news fact-checks were examined. Data consolidation was carried out using a standardized set of predefined information so that, in accordance with the study objectives and hypothesis, robust evidence could be generated to support the study conclusions. From this perspective, the analysis sought to identify the “repository of conceptions” that drives social bonds through fake news within the cyberterritories of digital social media. The expression “repository of conceptions” was formulated by Freud (1927/2014, p. 251) when referring to the set of premises, ideas, arguments, and other narrative resources “born from the need to make human helplessness bearable, and constructed from the material of memories of childhood and of the human race,” employed by religious enterprises in pursuit of their mass-forming objectives.

Herein, the purpose is to identify the repertoire of conceptions and discursive elements that promote bonding through fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic, which likewise possesses a capacity for mass formation and is similarly sustained by human vicissitudes, as in the phenomenon examined by Freud. According to Safatle (2016, p. 5), “societies are, at their most fundamental level, circuits of affects.” For the author, “as systems for the material reproduction of hegemonic forms of life, societies endow such forms with the power to secure adherence by continuously producing affects that lead us to embrace certain possibilities of life rather than others” (p. 15).

Based on this theoretical and methodological framework, information was collected on the media/platforms used; classifications (“misleading”/“false”); key and associated signifiers; conceptions of bonding; disseminators; enunciators; and measured engagement. In studies of digitality, “engagement” refers to the set of actions performed by users when interacting with content available on digital social media. In this study, likes (including positive or negative reactions made possible through specific application buttons), comments, and views were grouped under the category “interactions” to distinguish them from “shares.” This distinction was made because sharing is an action that implies and reveals a greater degree of user involvement, whereby users endorse and/or are affected by content to the extent that they redistribute it across their digital networks, thus constituting a decisive gesture in the formation and dynamics of cybermasses. In addition to its subjective and intersubjective dimensions, engagement is a determining factor in algorithmic operations because it can increase the distribution of content among users of a social network. In other words, engagement promotes further engagement and, from a machine-based perspective, affects connections by strengthening existing ones and creating new social bonds.

The economy of fake news during the pandemic

The detailed analysis shows that the media formats most frequently used in fake news were text (29) and audiovisual content (27), followed by photographs (5) and audio (1). Regarding classification, “misleading” content (40) was nearly

twice as frequent as “false” content (22). As for key signifiers, the main themes driving fake news were identified as follows: treatment (11), vaccine (8), vaccination (6), social isolation (6), chloroquine/ivermectin (6), mask (6), pandemic (4), mortality (4), virus (4), politics (2), spread (2), lethality (2), cases (2), press (1), laboratory testing (1), and resources (1). Signifiers related to protective measures and responses to the pandemic (the issues most crucial to survival and to overcoming this historical period) were the most frequently used. The term “treatment” was also prominent, despite the fact that no such treatment existed at the time.

Associated signifiers, i.e., those forming the contextual framework of fake news, were also identified: politics (31), scientific denialism (11), treatment (6), social isolation (6), China (6), chloroquine/ivermectin (5), vaccine (3), vaccination (3), virus (2), masks (1), mortality (1), testing (1), lethality (1), cure (1), and xenophobia/racism (1). In the case of the associated signifier with the highest absolute number of occurrences (“politics”) the fake news items with the highest engagement had senior political figures as their main agents of falsehood, including the President of the Republic and members of the Chamber of Deputies. It is therefore unsurprising that anti-science discourse ranked second, indicating that attacks on rationality find fertile ground in mass-forming falsehoods and are fully consistent with the hallmarks of the post-truth era.

Regarding disseminators, the following were identified: users in general (36 fake news items); blogs, websites, and channels (20); members of the Chamber of Deputies (4); and the President of the Republic (2). As for enunciators, the following were identified: users in general (40 fake news items), physicians (8), women members of the Chamber of Deputies (4), the President of the Republic (2), websites (3), bloggers (2), a pastor (1), a researcher (1), and a YouTuber (1). These disseminators and enunciators generated 10,658,401 interactions, including views, likes, and comments, of which 1,702,500 were concentrated on fake news concerning allegedly fabricated bodies of COVID-19 victims. Shares totaled 409,392, with 220,000 related to fake news about social isolation. The social media platforms used were Facebook (36 occurrences), Twitter (26), Instagram (12), YouTube (12), WhatsApp (6), Telegram (3), and TikTok (1).

Regarding the “repository of conceptions” underlying social bonding, the following were identified: appeals to paranoia (47), denial (44), xenophobia/racism (8), and hate speech (1). The term “paranoid suggestion narrative” was used to designate narratives appealing to the systematic and hallucinatory suspicion that something is being concealed, that something is being insidiously orchestrated within the symbolic institutional structures valued by contemporary civilization and commonly referred to as the “system.” Through their arguments and rhetorical resources, fake news narratives would purportedly reveal a liberating truth against manipulation by the “system,” thereby offering revolutionary knowledge to those who share the same “good news,” which allegedly frees them from the oppression of the press, science, intellectuals, and political actors positioned in opposition to the enunciators.

According to Ons (2018, p. 168), “social paranoia accompanies our everyday lives in a century that could be called the ‘century of suspicion,’” with a fixation on “revealing what lies behind things,” extending across the entire spectrum of socioeconomic and political-cultural life. In the psychoanalyst’s concise formulation, “paranoia is characterized by a systematized persecutory delusion, the predominance of interpretation, and the absence of intellectual deterioration” (p. 171).

By exploiting the paranoid trait of cyberculture, fake news draws on narratives that mobilize affects and perceptions connected with this defining feature of contemporary life. Within this realm of suspicion, the habit of distrusting is exploited and manipulated for purposes of mass communication. Kakutani (2018, p. 25) describes the dissemination of a “paranoid style,” sustained by “heated exaggeration, suspicion, and conspiratorial fantasy,” noting that attacks on reason and science recur, as do “episodic waves” of manifestations of the “paranoid style.” What makes the present moment particularly serious is the inscrutable mediatized reach of this process, something unprecedented in the history of sociability.

Roudinesco (2019, p. 36) notes that “conspiracy theories, rumors, and apocryphal texts proliferated as a result of technological innovations,” facilitating the emergence of “post-truth” in the 21st century. This phenomenon sustains the “aberrant idea” that “there would be no truthful information at all and that false news invented or fabricated (fake news) and disseminated through social media would be far more truthful and reliable,” because everything bearing the label “official” — i.e., everything belonging to an established system, such as the press — comes to be regarded as suspicious and manipulated.

Thus, in the face of challenges to the factual foundations of modernity, the use of paranoid affects emerges as a strategy of mass narrative capture within cyberterritories, an environment immersed in the contingency described by Ons (2018, p. 170): “Disbelief in the value of the word runs parallel to certainty about what lies behind that word. Thus, the same social paranoia constructed as a defense against violence ultimately ends up fueling it.”

Han (2022, p. 94) points to the emergence of a “society of distrust,” a fertile ground for the culture of fake news and its recourse to paranoia. One factor underlying this structural distrust is the capacity of digital technology to manipulate factual records: “Digitalization, i.e., the computerized world, is neither solid nor tenacious. On the contrary, it can be shaped and manipulated at will. Digitalization is diametrically opposed to facticity. Digitalization weakens factual awareness, awareness of reality.” Another factor stems from the excess of circulating information, which “even obscures the world.” “When we encounter a piece of information, we are always suspicious that the information could have been otherwise. [...] In the information society, we lose our fundamental trust” (Han, 2022, p. 94).

Regarding denial (*Verneinung*), according to the terminological analysis by Laplanche and Pontalis (2016, p. 293), within Freudian theory the concept is closely related, according to commentators and scholars, to disavowal (*Leugnen*) and repudiation (*Verleugnen*). According to Freud (1925/2011a, p. 277), “denial is a way of becoming aware of what has been repressed; indeed, it already constitutes a lifting of repression, but certainly not an acceptance of what has been repressed.”

Andrès (1996a, p. 356) states that, for Freud, “denial” can be understood both from the standpoint of the “pleasure-ego,” a judgment in which the enunciator denies any link between what is said and the self (“negation”), and from the standpoint of the “reality-ego,” a judgment in which the enunciator establishes that perceived reality does not correspond to their representation of it (“simple denial”). According to Roudinesco and Plon (1998, p. 145), “negation is a means by which every human being becomes aware of what they repress in the unconscious. Through this means, thought is therefore freed, by a logic of negativity, from the limitations imposed on it by repression.”

Regarding repudiation, Andrès (1996b, p. 446) states that it “brings into play a traumatic imaginary perception and must be distinguished from negation, which is situated in the symbolic field and participates in repression and its partial suspension.” With repudiation, the author emphasizes, “something entirely different is at stake, particularly a certain relationship with reality,” pointing to the issue of psychosis rather than neurosis and its demands for repression. Roudinesco and Plon (1998, p. 656) consider repudiation (*Verleugnung*) to “characterize a defense mechanism through which the subject refuses to recognize the reality of a negative perception.” Through this refusal, “external reality” is denied in order to reconstruct a hallucinatory reality.

Broadly speaking, in his study of “denial,” Freud (1925/2011a, p. 278) states that “the function of judgment essentially has two decisions to make. It must attribute or refuse a characteristic to a thing, and it must admit or contest the existence in reality of a representation.” In the case examined here, these judgments reject the deadly nature of the pandemic and also contest the facts occurring at that time, such as the contagion affecting millions of people, the deaths of thousands (and millions worldwide) the absence of an effective treatment, the value of science, and the role of vaccines in confronting the lethal virus, among others.

In discussing a “new psychic economy,” including its psychoticizing and perverse foundations, Melman (2003, p. 211) argues that the psychic procedure of repudiation, which can be expressed as “I know [...] but even so,” is “a way of simultaneously acknowledging what is and, at the same time, failing to acknowledge it.” As Valéry (2016, p. 22) aptly summarizes, “to deny A is to show A behind bars.”

Fake news classified as xenophobic and racist comprises content grounded in xenophobia — “socioculturally, an a priori distrust and aversion, and even aggression and hatred, toward foreigners, manifested as prejudices and stereotypes associated with certain forms of racism or chauvinism” (Japiassú & Marcondes, 2006, p. 284) — and racism — “any set of beliefs that classifies humanity into distinct collectivities, defined according to natural and/or cultural attributes, and organizes those attributes into a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority” (Zubaida, 1996, p. 643).

Xenophobia and racism “interact” with hate speech, forming elements of the same contentious repertoire and extending into the sphere of political-ideological and/or political-institutional experience. In the case examined herein, hate speech seeks to generate mass opposition to political adversaries or groups espousing nonhegemonic views, with the aim of transforming them into enemies and social pariahs to be eliminated.

At this point, the hostile potential of individuals can be harnessed and manipulated for purposes of control and domination. Freud (1930/2010, pp. 78–80) identified “a primary hostility among human beings,” as a result of which “society is constantly threatened with disintegration.” Because “instinct-driven passions are stronger than interests dictated by reason,” “civilization must use every means to set limits to human aggressive instincts,” he observed. “It is clearly not easy for human beings to renounce the satisfaction of their inclination toward aggression; they do not feel comfortable doing so,” he noted. Thus, through an instrumentalization of the hostility that remains despite the constraints imposed by civilization, “it is always possible to bind a considerable number of people together in love, provided that others remain available as targets for the expression of aggression.” Including prejudice and the division between us and them, Freud called this phenomenon—the satisfaction of aggressive impulses through which cohesion among members of a community is facilitated by fixing external targets for structurally rooted hatred—the “narcissism of minor differences.”

Thus, as observed, paranoid, denialist, xenophobic, and racist conceptions of bonding give rise to a rejection of factuality through the manipulation of affects and traumatic issues, with the aim of interfering with sociopolitical and public health perceptions of the pandemic, while also aggravating the risk of mass mortality during this period. In this context, fake news reveals an unprecedented movement of media-driven mass formation around “alternative facts,” especially within and through cyberterritories. It can therefore be understood as a symptom of the unraveling of the modern civilizational pact, confirming Freud’s observation (1930/2010a, p. 121) that “human judgments of value are inevitably governed by their wishes for satisfaction and are therefore attempts to support their illusions with arguments,” or, as Valéry (2016, p. 70) put it, “consciousness reigns, but does not govern.”

The cybermass

Humans identifying themselves as robots. The analogy, which aptly describes various members of masses, is no longer merely metaphorical in contemporary society but has become a feature of reality itself. The self-declared humanoid behind a fake news post circulated on Twitter (“@Thaclaroquina,” on May 29, 2020) proudly presented an extensive self-description: “Catholic, conservative, anti-left, and Bolsonaro’s robot with a CPF.” The expression “Robot with a CPF” appears to provide an unequivocal, concise symbol of a phenomenon characteristic of digitality: fake news as a powerful mediatized social bond within cyberterritories, giving rise to cybermasses.

From this perspective, the notion of robotization is grounded in the perception of immense machine-like collectives, devoid of ethical and moral consciousness, driven by uncritical automatisms and reproducing or executing tasks according to prior programming. Robots, or bots, are routinely used to induce connections within cyberterritories. According to Centola (2022, p. 111), they are “automated programs for sending messages,” which connect through bot networks (botnets) and also interact with the digital profiles of human users. In this way, they create the impression that such accounts belong to “flesh-and-blood” users and that the messages they circulate are relevant, credible, factual, and significant, thereby reinforcing perceptions of popularity.

Thus, within the informationalization of intersubjective interactions, such as digital social media, robots are algorithmic agents that perform predefined functions in accordance with a specific task: fostering mediatized bonds through the distribution of digital information, including fake news. Across the vast landscapes of cyberterritories, the “Robot with a CPF” emerges as a perfect convergence of metaphor and reality, constituting a historical phenomenon of profound significance and considerable impact on contemporary sociability: the mediatized mass.

Research on the phenomenon of masses has, for more than a century, been fundamentally shaped by Freud’s perspective (1921/2011b). According to Freud, a mass is amalgamated by feelings that are “always very simple and very exaggerated,” “knows neither doubt nor uncertainty,” and is “extraordinarily suggestible and credulous.” Because it is “uncritical, impulsive, changeable, and excitable,” for the mass, “the improbable does not exist” (p. 25). Moreover, masses “have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them. The unreal always takes precedence over the real; what is untrue influences them almost as strongly as what is true” (p. 29).

Within the economy of masses, the contingency of structural helplessness appears to be a decisive element. Rooted in the precocity with which human beings enter the world, the painful sense of abandonment in the face of life’s turmoil and uncertainty constitutes a recurrent source of anguish, which varies in intensity according to each person’s personality and life experiences, as well as according to the *Zeitgeist* that envelops individuals in each historical era.

For Freud (1927/2014, p. 266), “the terrible impression of childhood helplessness” creates a demand to be loved that never abandons human beings. Thus, as eternally “unprotected” children whose connections with others continue to be tinged with fear, individuals seek redemption from their own helplessness, including through the formation of masses. A pandemic such as that caused by the coronavirus only intensifies this sense of helplessness, while also heightening awareness of what Freud (1930/2010) regarded as the inescapable foundations of human unhappiness: inhabiting a body that ages, becomes ill, and dies; inhabiting a planet characterized by unpredictable and sometimes deadly environmental conditions; and sharing everyday life with others who are themselves similarly hostile and aggressive.

This triad, intensified by the pandemic, also lends itself, through fake news, to attempts to organize masses within the cyberterritories of digital social media, as examined in this study. Then as now, these are “heterogeneous crowds,” in the words of Le Bon (1895/2018, p. 146), whose work Freud (1921/2011b) engaged extensively in developing his studies of mass psychology. Such crowds consist of “individuals of any kind, whatever their occupation or intelligence,” since “only unconscious feelings are at work.”

As Freud analyzed, masses are woven together by a libidinal, loving factor, while hatred is directed toward an external target because, if exercised intra corporis, it would cause the group to implode. Thus, the primary direction of any mass is to love itself as a project of existence and to hate an external other as a condition of survival. From this structural configuration, common goals are established to provide meaning to the group; in the case examined here, through fake news. As Canetti (2019) observed, masses are generally organized around the affect of fear and its management (i.e., the management of helplessness and its anguishing affects) constituting a shield against the unknown, the different, and the uncontrollable. It is therefore no coincidence that fake news so frequently appeals to contentious, hateful, and paranoid conceptions of bonding.

Following Canetti (pp. 30–31), masses tend to expand indefinitely: “no boundary is naturally imposed on their growth. [...] There are no absolutely reliable means capable of definitively preventing the growth of a mass.” They are also always oriented toward a greater common goal that mobilizes them, thereby “strengthening the feeling of equality.” In this respect, it is important to note that fake news is a type of narrative that thrives only through the active participation of subjectivities. Collectives amalgamated through communication are no longer formed primarily through reception, even if such reception was never entirely passive, as was characteristic of the 20th century. In digitality, it is the individual act of receiving and sharing messages (in this case, misinformation) that energizes, sustains, and expands a mediatized mass within the cyberterritories of social media around falsehoods, for example.

This is a *motu proprio*, a subjective act that organizes and mobilizes audiences, rather than an outcome determined primarily by the reach or accessibility of a technical signal, as occurred under the previous communication paradigm, before the web and especially before digital social media. A dynamic of volitional acts feeds and expands networked masses, driven by the rhythm of vertiginously continuous updating. It therefore serves both the group's objectives of fraternal cohesion and the provision of content and motivations for hateful actions directed toward those outside the network.

This intense flow, which nearly equates human beings with robots (bots) because of the automatism involved in receiving and forwarding content without critical filtering, is also sustained by a contemporary anxiety: the fear of being out of date and disconnected from the cohesive rhythm of the mass, or FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). In other words, intersubjectivity articulated through communicative messages within cyberterritories depends not only on the use of algorithms, "a sequence of rules, routines, and logical procedures based on a precise mathematical system, leading to the solution of a problem, the completion of a line of reasoning, or the execution of a task in a finite number of steps" (Neiva, 2013, p. 16), and the use of bots, but also on the autonomous act of receiving and sharing mediatized falsehoods through a variety of technical devices, potentially revealing features of a particular sociocultural configuration.

The findings revealed by this study indicate that fake news functions as an agent of social bonding through the manipulation of a range of affects, such as fear, love, and hatred. Fake news lies at the epicenter of the formation of a new type of mass, the mediatized mass, amalgamated through identification with enunciators and narratives that promise relief from existential distress. It also constitutes a gregarious mechanism by offering unquestionable or mythical answers and positions at a time marked by the declining prestige of science and reason, informational vertigo, and a sense of helplessness intensified by neoliberalism and the pandemic. Fake news seeks to persuade, congregate, and inspire trust by assuming the appearance of reality and drawing on forms of knowledge and narrative practices associated with discourses of truth, such as journalistic news. Its motivations may be political, cultural, and economic. In this sense, fake news can be regarded as a media-based refinement of the age-old phenomenon of rumor (Kapferer, 1993).

From this perspective, the formation of "egogregarious herds" appears evident, in which "the ego and its instinctual satisfactions are valued because they can be industrially exploited" (Dufour, 2013, p. 313). This phenomenon resonates with Valéry's (2016, p. 92) "equation of truth": "if you think like a large number of people, your thought becomes superfluous. For the mass, its feeling is a 'truth.'" Although the study identifies political leaders as sponsors of misleading messages with extraordinary reach, the analysis extends beyond individual leaders. It can be observed that it is discourse itself, through denialist, paranoid, and hateful narratives, that captures and recruits subjectivities, articulating them into vast robotic contingents that consume and circulate fake news transformed into congregating "truths."

What magnetizes individuals and produces an identificatory bond is the narrative disguised as news, which mobilizes subjects toward social bonding. Within the contingencies of digitality and the setting of informational vertigo, passive masses no longer take shape, given the demand for atomized volitional acts of receiving and sharing content in order to form and energize groups numbering in the thousands and millions around mesmerizing discourses.

It can also be observed that alienation in relation to fake news occurs through bonds of adherence that fill distressing voids and doubts. It is not subjective division, the driving force of desire, that initiates voluntary participation in the viral circulation of fake news, but rather a demand for an effect of identification among members of mediatized masses. This demand revolves around "truths" sustained by idealizations of a cosmogony with no grounding in reality, which provide reassurance through a peculiar form of belonging characteristic of the post-truth era.

Comparing the "face-to-face" dynamics of "traditional masses" and their leaders with the "political strategy mediated through networks and their anonymity," Rinaldi (2021, p. 61) argues that the latter "seeks to tame the various forms of enjoyment and produce a homogenization of enjoyment to be sold as an ideal." Thus, "this 'environment' gives rise to a radically negative discourse that presents itself as new. It is within this context that hate speech, in its disruptive form derived from the death drive, paradoxically emerges in place of the ideal."

The production/reproduction, or pervasive mediatization, of fake news occurs under technical and socially articulated conditions enabled by digital media. In this way, fake news facilitates a sense of belonging and identification that obscures or fills the perception of structural helplessness, homogenizing certainties and forms of knowledge in the face of various forms of anguish, while mobilizing affects ranging from rage to indifference, including unconditional passion and racism.

Penna (2022, p. 67) emphasizes "the primacy of unconscious processes within the mass," whose bonds are sustained "by libidinal investment, identifications among individuals, and ideal agencies," and highlights the central role of illusion in the contingencies of mass formation, "whether in ephemeral crowds or organized groups, gathered or not around a leader." According to the author, illusion functions "as a defense against original helplessness." Moreover, "although libido is the primary aggregating element in masses and identifications are the most primordial forms of social bond, no group can be sustained without the presence of illusion" (pp. 72–73). Within the context of this study, the proximity between "illusion" and "alternative facts," the "post-factual era," and "post-truth" is evident. In digitality, the illusions generated by fake news constitute an amalgam that produces digital social bonds and gives rise to cybermasses.

Conclusion

In the “post-truth” era, in which affects and perceptions exert greater influence on opinion formation and behavioral orientation, the present study sought to examine the contingencies of fake news within cyberterritories, which constitute an existential locus that increasingly overshadows sensory experience.

Based on the measured engagement, the findings indicate that mediatized falsehoods possess gregarious appeal, mobilizing masses within the cyberterritoriality of digital social media. Through a repository of conceptions grounded in paranoia, denial, xenophobia, racism, distortion of reality, and hate speech, fake news provides elements that amalgamate and energize masses in their contemporary forms.

In the wake of fake news, human beings become bots or robotic beings — “Robots with a CPF” — in the mass dissemination and consumption of “alternative facts.” It is important to emphasize that fake news is not an “error,” but a strategy. In light of the logic underlying the formation and maintenance of masses, it constitutes a mechanism for creating vast mediatized groups in contemporary society: cybermasses.

For these collectivities, “truth” is no longer validated by fact or factuality, but by the logic of large numbers, by massive mobilization, and by the hallucinatory immediacy of constant updates. “Truths” are thus formed within a climate of customized cyberengagement. In this way, pervasive narratives create a multichannel media enclosure across interconnected platforms and devices, generating persuasion and consensus through informational exhaustion, discursive repetition, and intensive connectivity.

These conceptions of bonding echo a fixation on a decomplexified world anchored in simple and simplistic truths while also resonating with a pandemic form of social paranoia. The primary function of fake news is not to misinform, but to form — to shape masses amalgamated around mesmerizing and mobilizing narratives within cyberterritories.

As demonstrated by the Avaaz (2020) study cited in the Introduction and by the findings concerning the reach of fake news, false news constituted one of the key elements in the historical contingencies of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, which resulted in more than 600,000 deaths.

The veils of restraint woven by the Enlightenment are being torn away. By challenging the privileges of factuality and scientific knowledge in the constitution of sociocultural and political bonds established in modernity, the mass dissemination of fake news echoes “alternative facts” while imitating the centuries-old and prestigious narrative form of journalistic news, capturing and recruiting mediatized masses in the “post-factual era.”

The period examined was marked by the advance of populism and political extremism, which employed perverse strategies that broke with objective truth and the boundaries of factuality. Their aims involved the acquisition and maintenance of antidemocratic power through the radical politicization of crucial issues, such as public health. This occurred in Brazil during the pandemic under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro.

Poovey (1998, p. 328) notes that, despite the considerable intellectual density of “postmodern” thought produced during the 20th century, the modern fact did not eliminate older approaches to the problem of knowledge production. Likewise, “postmodern facts” have not eliminated the legacy of modern factuality. Furthermore, “as with any epistemological revolution, the one that late twentieth-century citizens of the global information village are now experiencing will take a long time to unfold, the author predicts.

Within this context, Hannah Arendt, in questioning whether the activity of thinking — the “habit of examining whatever happens or attracts attention, regardless of results and specific content” — might be among the factors that lead humanity “to refrain from doing evil” and/or condition people against it (Arendt, 2009, p. 20), offers an eloquent indication for a time of cybermasses amalgamated by fake news: the “banality of evil” is grounded in thoughtlessness, in the decision not to subject the concrete facts of life to the scrutiny of thought (Arendt, 2016).

In this sense, the historical dispute now unfolding between facts and “alternative facts,” together with their respective congregating narratives (news and fake news) constitutes yet another complex and challenging chapter in humanity’s long journey in search of symbolizations that provide support and civilizational points of reference amid the inescapable contingencies of the real, especially death.

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