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A subtle hypocrisy: insights into the Italian politics' inertia on the counter-disinformation policy

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A SUBTLE HYPOCRISY: INSIGHTS INTO THE ITALIAN POLITICS' INERTIA ON THE COUNTER-DISINFORMATION POLICY

Disinformation has become a significant concern in the digital age, particularly with the proliferation of social networks. This phenomenon poses a threat to Western democracies, as it can manipulate public opinion, fuel political polarization, and facilitate the spread of fake news. The mechanisms provided by digital platforms have played a pivotal role in promoting the so-called «post-truth» era, enabling the dissemination of misleading narratives and the manipulation of public opinion. The Italian context began to prioritise the issue of disinformation after the notorious «Facebook-Cambridge Analytica» scandal. However, despite empirical evidence demonstrating the dangers of disinformation, the Italian political system has not adopted regulatory measures to address the issue. This essay aims to analyse the stance of the major Italian political parties and explore why the Italian political apparatus has not taken adequate action to ensure transparency, reliability, and trustworthiness within the digital media information ecosystem. To achieve this goal, a qualitative analysis of Italian political party leaders' Facebook posts from 2018 to 2021 will be conducted, to identify how the issue of disinformation is framed and understood by political actors. By detecting convergences or divergences in the narratives and strategies employed, valuable insights into the parties' approaches to disinformation can be gleaned. The findings of this study will shed light on the configuration of the issue within the Italian politics, providing explanations for the lack of regulatory tools and institutional responses to counter disinformation. Finally, understanding how the major political parties in Italy perceive and address disinformation is crucial for safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes and fostering public trust in the digital media information system.

KEYWORDS *Online Disinformation, Counter-Disinformation Policy, Disinformation Politics, Italian Case, Social Media.*

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1. Introduction

Contemporary Western society is characterised by a progressive process of democratic regression (Diamond 2021), which arise from a twofold synchronic process. On the one hand, the approach of public institutions is increasingly less oriented towards the tangible protection of personal rights and freedoms (Diamond 2015). On the other hand, a propensity for radicalisation and polarisation of the public debate (Norris and Inglehart 2019), which is typical of populist rhetoric (Ruzza 2018). This has led to a progressive decline in levels of trust in the collegial bodies of democratic representation, both at the national, European and international levels in the current socio-economic-cultural context (Przeworski 2019). Explanations can be traced to several heterogeneous global trends that, encrypted by the «creeping crisis» (Boin *et al.* 2020), could undermine democratic values, processes and institutions (McNamara and Newman 2020).

Furthermore, the advent of social media has increased and changed the pervasiveness of complex techno-social systems (Chadwick 2017; Bennato 2020; Sorice 2020; Fuchs 2021). They were initially considered a tool for democratising and facilitating access to information, facilitating potential bottom-up counter-power strategies in opposition to existing autocracies and anocracies (Castells 2009; Diamond and Plattner 2012). Conversely, social media has become a strategic tool for distorting the information system and attacking democratic systems and their functions by hostile actors (Tucker *et al.* 2017). As part of this scenario, online disinformation represents a real threat to the systems and processes underpinning Western democracies (Christie 2018; European Commission 2018b). This strategy is strongly fuelled by the mechanisms of digital platforms (Van Dijck *et al.* 2018), which enable forms of influence and manipulation of public opinion by hostile actors (Morlino and Sorice 2021).

Against this background, this paper aims to discuss some findings in order to explain the non-intervention by the Italian political system. The introduction is followed by a literature review section on the complex definition of online disinformation, its potential risks for contemporary democracies, and possible prevention and countermeasures, finally providing insight into the peculiarities of the Italian context that make it worthy of attention. This is followed by a section illustrating the objectives and research questions following the analysis of the relevant literature, as well as the empirical materials selected and the method of analysis. The results and their discussion are then proposed. Finally, the conclusions attempt to provide an answer to the research questions posed, drawing further reflections for future research ideas.

2. The concept of disinformation and the salience of an interdisciplinary analysis

Disinformation is not an exclusively post-modern phenomenon. The origin of term is generally associated with the Russian tactic of dezinformatsiya, originating in 1923 as a weapon for conducting strategic intelligence operations (Shultz and Godson 1984; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Cases of falsifications and alterations of reality by governments of various countries are widely documented in reports made public by the Cia and the Us Office of Public Affairs (1981). The Kgb also employed disinformation as a strategic tactic during the Soviet War by falsifying and manipulating communication networks (Cull *et al.* 2003). The obvious link between manipulation and disinformation is thus clear, with the former being the target and the latter a potential tool. The Italian political scientist Leonardo Morlino has developed the theme of manipulation of political choices in the analysis of the quality of democracies (Morlino 2011) and how these are potentially subverted through various strategies, actions and mechanisms, including disinformation (Morlino 2021).

Nevertheless, there is no univocal definition of this phenomenon, albeit it is crucial to focus on the defining aspect in order to outline an adequate counter-strategy. An abundant variety of terms and expressions alluding to this strategy can be found in the literature on the topic: fake news and false news, digital misinformation, disinformation, rumours, hoaxes, etc. The various definitions show the difficulty of finding a universal description, given the plethora of content types, purposes, processes, and sources. However, as the present research work focuses on the Italian political context (whose prevention and contrast approach is currently delegated to the regulatory framework configured by the European institutions), it is consistent to focus on the definition adopted by the European Commission (2018b, 3-4): «Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policy-making processes as well as public goods such as the protection of Eu citizens' health, the environment or security. Disinformation does not include reporting errors, satire and parody, or identified partisan news and commentary».

A recent publication has developed a systemic analysis of the literature on the phenomenon of disinformation, in order to propose a conceptual framework of possible content types based on three emerging dimensions (Kapantai *et al.* 2021). Its results are summarised in Table 1. The «motivation» dimension refers to the reason why online disinformation content is created

and disseminated. These polluters of the information system can have different sources, such as social, political, advertising, and even for humorous purposes (Wardle and Derkshan 2017). Accordingly, they have classified four key reasons: profit; ideological; psychological, and unclear (Kapantai *et al.* 2021). «Facticity» is a dimension extensively adopted in the study of disinformation content, referring to the adherence of false or misleading news to the referred event (Tandoc *et al.* 2017). Thus, false content can be more or less accurate in some of its parts, or be totally fake (Tambini 2017). Finally, «verifiability» refers to the degree of checkability of the information through other sources (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), and hence limited to two binary characteristics, yes or not (Kapantai *et al.* 2021).

Tab. 1. *Types and dimensions of online disinformation*

| Content Types | Dimensions | | | | | | | | |
| | Motive | | | | Facticity | | | Verifiability | |
	Profit	Ideological	Psychological	Unclear	Mostly true	Mostly false	False	Yes	Not
Clickbait	x		x		x			x	
Conspiracy theories		x	x			x			x
Fabrication				x			x		x
Misleading connection			x		x				x
Hoax			x			x	x		x
Biased or one-sided		x				x		x	
Imposter			x			x		x	
Pseudoscience	x		x		x				x
Rumours				x		x			x
Fake reviews	x						x		x
Trolling			x			x			x

Source: author's elaboration of Kapantai *et al.*'s findings (2021, 1317).

Given the fast-changing nature of the phenomenon, it is not possible to definitively categorise the types and dimensions of online disinformation, but the work of Kapantai *et al.* (2021) provides a proposal for an inclusive and interdisciplinary conceptualisation about possible and future forms of disinformation, in order to avoid a fragmentation of research on the topic, the

theoretical approach and, consequently, the types of appropriate actions and policies needed.

3. Reasons and approaches to counter disinformation

Online disinformation increasingly flows on social networking platforms, which provide a virtual meeting space for networked individuals, groups, organisations and institutions to exchange multimedia content, including information and news. As a result, social media become actual information arenas of Western democracies, exposing them to ground-breaking techniques of political subversion. Actually, social networks can facilitate the construction of individualised political messaging, the enhancement of specific group dynamics and political polarisation, the radicalisation of opinion through the use of predictive algorithms and echo-chamber, and the dissemination of fake news (Christie 2018). The researcher and former Nato official Edward Hunter Christie, an expert in cyber strategy and security, has identified four principles which should be addressed in designing counter-disinformation policies (Christie 2018). Firstly, transparency should be applied to individualised political content, enabling users to recognise the sponsoring organisation. The second is the principle of foreign non-interference, in order to avoid foreign governments' organisations from interfering with national democratic processes and procedures by forbidding (and reinforcing such bans with enforcement measures) these practices. The third is the declination of ethics in technological innovation, which would make it possible to protect industrial assets linked to the configuration, application and development of algorithms, avoiding pathological strategies of radical and polarising targeting. Lastly, there is the guarantee of safeguarding the integrity of public discourse, balancing freedom of expression and media pluralism with the trustworthiness of information. Based on these criteria, it is possible to introduce potential approaches to counter-disinformation policies.

A research work on existing policy ideas and instruments in tackling disinformation has systematised the possible policy measures and governance arrangements, attempting to outline two ideal types of intervention models (Barbieri *et al.* 2021), which are summarised in Table 2. On the one hand, the techno-centric model is based on three options of measures. The first is the pure regulatory intervention, i.e., the configuration of prescriptions and enforcement by the state against platforms (Rochefort 2020; Di Mascio *et al.* 2021a). The second is the digital platforms' accountability for content published by users (similar to editorial accountability), with forms of control and poten-

tial sanctions by independent authorities (Gorwa 2019; De Blasio and Selva 2021). The third is pluralism by design, i.e., an absence of regulation where citizens should be able to discern real from fake news (Vraga *et al.* 2020). The third type of intervention does not involve any form of coercion, even though its practical adoption has proved unsuccessful in recent years, due to the cognitive distortions experienced by the people in the social network, as well as the perverse exploitation of platform tools and mechanisms. On the other hand, the systemic model aims to stimulate the promotion of citizens' digital and media literacy, in order to encourage users' empowerment and resilience in the digital information system by promoting the principles of content transparency and information pluralism within the digital platforms (Van Dijck *et al.* 2018).

TAB. 2. *Counter-disinformation models*

	Techno-centric model	Systemic model
Measure	• Hard law • External control (ex-ante and ex-post) • Enforcement	• Soft law • Investigation • Digital and media literacy • Digital platform accountability
Governance Arrangement	• Centralisation of enforcement measures • Establishment of an enforcement authority	• Centralisation of analysis and promotion activities • Public-private partnership

Source: author's elaboration of Barbieri *et al.*'s findings (2021, 307).

The difference between the two models lies in the stated goals: while the short-term techno-centric model looks at a mere containment of existing disinformation content (which may mutate and elude legally defined controls), the interventions of the systemic model are based on long-term goals, built on the «assumption that disinformation operations can be stopped by citizens, rather than by top-down interventions or technical tools» (Barbieri *et al.* 2021, 291).

Focusing on the Italian case, it shows a tendency towards a systemic model, thus through the adoption of non-regulatory instruments, but aimed at analysing the phenomenon and its consequences on electoral processes (Selva 2021). This could lead to an increase in the salience of the issue in the public and political debate, even if the political one seems to have been limited to superficial discussions, merely discussing the issue as an attack on opposition political configurations (Di Mascio *et al.* 2021a). The Italian Communications regulatory authority (Agcom) has extensively dealt with the issue, especially

in analysing the phenomenon and playing a relevant role at the European le-
vel (Di Mascio *et al.* 2021b). As a matter of fact, the European Commission,
based on the pioneering investigations on the phenomenon carried out by
Agcom, has initially pushed platforms towards self-regulation measures (Eu-
ropean Commission 2018a; Saurwein and Spencer-Smith 2020). Given their
softness, the European approach has been directed towards a techno-centric
model, through measures enacted by the European Commission and jointly
with the various stakeholders (digital platforms included), in order to shape
a co-regulatory framework through a broad package of reforms, including
the Digital service act (Dsa). The Dsa provides new requirements for speci-
fic actors and establishes new enforcement authorities (European Parliament
and Council 2022). Moreover, its direct application is also aimed at non-Eu/
Eea actors who address users located within the Eu. The Dsa deals with online
disinformation along with a combination of information disorders (Barbieri
and Ottone 2023), which are considered illegal and harmful to the established
freedoms and principles meant as the cornerstones of contemporary Western
democracies (European Parliament and Council 2022).

4. Materials and method

The Italian case thus appears to lack regulatory instruments in the
counter-disinformation policy, due to a fragmented political apparatus unable
to tackle the issue in the appropriate institutional fora (Di Mascio *et al.* 2021a).
Accordingly, this work aims to analyse the configuration of online disinforma-
tion by Italian political parties, in order to understand why the Italian political
system has not addressed the intervention of the institutions in ensuring the
transparency, reliability and authoritativeness of the digital media information
system, as a pillar to guarantee the protection of basic democratic processes.
The research question is threefold: How do Italian politicians shape the pro-
blem of online disinformation? What is the perceived and associated danger?
And are there proposals on how to tackle the issue at the national level?

In order to provide answers to the three questions posed, a qualitative
analysis of the posts published by the main representatives of Italian political
parties on their Facebook pages from 2018 to 2021 is proposed. The temporal
frame considers two salient events. On the one hand, the Cambridge Analytica
scandal in 2018 configures disinformation as an instrument of foreign inter-
ference and political manipulation (Morlino and Sorice 2021). On the other
hand, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, combined with the infodemic outbre-
ak, affects the success of virus-containment policies, and thus the safety and

health of citizens (Who 2020). The detection and download of Italian politicians' Facebook posts were carried out through the Facebook's CrowdTangle platform, extracting posts containing the following keywords deductively derived from the relevant literature: «disinformation», «fake news», «falsehoods», «lies», «rumours», «hoaxes», «hate speech», «misinformation», «malinformation», «information disorder», and «post-truth». Table 3 below shows the distribution of Facebook posts from 2018 to 2021.

TAB. 3. *Distribution of Italian political leaders' Facebook posts about online disinformation, from 2018 to 2021*

Italian Political Leaders (alphabetical order)	Total	2018	2019	2020	2021
Giorgia Meloni	22	2	9	6	5
Luigi Di Maio	35	18	5	12	0
Maria Elena Boschi	8	3	3	1	1
Matteo Renzi	47	21	22	2	2
Matteo Salvini	26	8	6	10	2

Source: author's elaboration on CrowdTangle's data.

Facebook was chosen as the platform for two reasons. The first is its relevance in the media system as a tool converging with other traditional media in the flow of political communication, acting as a redundant media (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020). The second is that Facebook represents the platform most used by European (Eurostat 2021) and Italian citizens (Agcom 2021). This explains why the platform is widely used by Italian politicians, as well as leaders have more followers than on Twitter (*e.g.*, Berti 2020; Amoretti *et al.* 2021; Barbieri and Rumore 2023). The research is carried out through content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008) where the posts are assumed as fragmented parts of an ideological discourse (Fuchs 2017), but when they are synchronically (from a comparative perspective) and diachronically (following the course of events) analysed, the posts result functional in constructing the political narrative and, consequently, their propaganda on the selected study topic. The following elements are inductively coded (Van Gorp 2010) into an Excel spreadsheet analysis form:

- the nominalisation detects the qualification of disinformation;
- the argumentation identifies the implications and dangers of disinformation in the Italian context, as well as the related emerging threat;
- the attribution of blame configures who is blameable for the disinformation strategies;

- the proposed solutions detect proposed counter-disinformation measures.

Political leaders are chosen from among the best-performing leaders on Facebook, according to DeRev's analysis, based on the engagement and weekly increase of Italian political profiles (DeRev 2021). From this list, those who did not present any results (or inconsistent data) from the selection and extraction of posts were excluded. Accordingly, and as shown in Table 3, the political leaders covered by this research are Matteo Renzi (former leader of Democratic party – Pd and now of Italia Viva), Giorgia Meloni (leader of Brothers of Italy), Matteo Salvini (leader of The League), and Luigi di Maio (former leader of Five Star Movement – 5Sm and now of Impegno Civico). Maria Elena Boschi (former member of Pd and now of Italia Viva) is added as the first signatory of the proposal to establish an ad hoc parliamentary commission on fake news. This selection reflects also the main political leaders involved in the selected temporal frame, detecting different spectrums of Italian political stances according to both ideological and party affiliation. Thus, the content analysis of their narratives will make it possible to detect how the issue of disinformation is perceived by Italian politics, providing interpretations of the narratives and possible strategies proposed at a national political level, detecting also potential convergences or divergences.

5. Findings and discussion

Findings are outlined in the following figures and tables. Predominantly, Facebook posts analysed of the five politicians are composed of a short text supplemented by images that graphically and with concise expressions recall the content of the post. With regard to Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, their posts are occasionally supported by videos and live streams, especially when the two leaders want to give explanations for the news spread about them by political opponents. Luigi Di Maio and Maria Elena Boschi make extensive use of hashtags, «#hoaxes» and «#nofakenews» correspondingly, and they frequently share other posts in order to corroborate their statements or complaints against their opponents. Matteo Renzi's posts are characterised by a very long text, through which he defends himself against attacks received, by listing his reasons and/or justifications.

There are elements of convergence and divergence between the strategies adopted by Italian politicians. Concerning the nominalisation of online disin-

formation (see Figures a1, a2, a3, a4, and a5 below[1]), a predominance of the terms «hoax(es)» and «fake news» can be observed. Meloni (Figure a1) employs these two terms for two different purposes. The word «hoax» is mainly used to report an alleged disinformation strategy against her, her party, and right-wing political parties. Meanwhile, when she uses the term «fake news» or other scientific nomenclature (such as «disinformation»), she acts sarcastically, in order to debunk and undermine her opponents' accusations about her use of fake news. Salvini (see Figure a2) also makes similar associations, speaking of «left-wing hoaxers», as well as «intellectuals» who «conspire» against the «common people», in order to maintain their «Parliamentary chair» and alleged associated privileges. Similarly, Di Maio (see Figure a3) exploits the issue to defend himself, defining any statement made by his political opponents as «mega-galactic hoaxes», «false myths» and «distorted/imprecise news/reports». Conversely, Renzi and Boschi qualify the problem of disinformation as a real danger to democratic processes, as it represents strategies to manipulate citizens/users, and influence electoral results. They both identify disinformation as a weapon largely used by populist configurations. Renzi (see Figure a4) illustrates disinformation as a «systemic attack» against his person and allies, as a «mud machine» against them, as well as part of a «conspiracy», where «trolls» paid by populist leaders saturate the web, thus «polluting» the media system. Boschi (see Figure a5) associates the issue of disinformation with «hate speech» contents, which creates «fear» and «prejudicial» emotions against her, as well as triggering real «verbal aggression» on the web through the spread of «systemic hate campaign».

Regarding argumentative strategies, trends of convergence and divergence in the attribution of the threat related to online disinformation are similarly observable (see Table 4). As detectable from the dominant argumentation, the attribution of the threat is predominantly associated with the political dimension, i.e., configuring the issue of online disinformation as a risk to the integrity of the public and political debate, thus undermining democratic processes such as voting.

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[1] Figure a1, as well as all other subsequent figures mentioned in the text (from a1 to a10) can be found in the following online appendix (Google drive): https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1uRPRVXPxl0afzBKNNMJZCNhUl9acA2TJ?usp=sharing.

TAB. 4. *Threat argumentative strategies detected by Italian politics leaders' Facebook posts (percentage values)*

Emerging argument dimension (alphabetical order)	Giorgia Meloni	Matteo Salvini	Luigi Di Maio	Matteo Renzi	Maria Elena Boschi
Democracy	13,6	15,4	22,9	21,3	25
Economy	13,6	11,5	25,7	25,5	37
Elites and privileges	13,6	11,5	40	0	0
Eu and foreign affairs	13,6	11,5	8,6	8,5	12,5
Health	27,3	11,5	14,3	17	0
Justice	13,6	11,5	14,3	12,8	37,5
Lobby	31,8	11,5	57,1	0	12,5
Media	31,8	11,5	77,1	29,8	0
Migration	18,2	15,4	0	2,1	0
Political	86,4	65,4	94,3	85,1	100
Rights and freedoms	4,5	11,5	2,9	2,1	12,5
Science and Covid-19	4,5	7,7	5,7	12,8	0
Sovereignty	4,5	11,5	2,9	4,3	12,5
Values	9,1	11,5	22,9	38,3	87,5
Welfare and employment	22,7	11,5	31,4	25,5	25

Source: author's elaboration on CrowdTangle's data.

Giorgia Meloni's discourse appears informal, with striking expressions such as «cazzari», attempting to demolish claims distant from her political position, through the use of pragmatic sentences, and quotes from representatives of the scientific world. This approach aims to undermine the efforts advocated by the left and 5Sm exponents against disinformation, reporting their personalistic interest aimed at imposing «left-wing propaganda» and warnable «censorship» against right-wing orientations. This is particularly detectable after the proposal to set up a Parliamentary commission of investigation on fake news during the wave of infodemics on Covid-19 (Figure a6).

Meloni exploits elitist arguments in her political narrative, where an alleged lobby composed of the left, traditional media and digital platforms intends to impose a dominant thought. This also fits in with the arguments related to migration, where she claims to be a defender of foreigners, who should be

helped «at their own homes» and not exploited by human traffickers, which are in collusion with Ngos and the Eu, thus criminalising them. His arguments are often embedded in the values of the Italian right-wing, which are considered «traditional», but she never gets to the heart of the matter. Concerning the attribution of responsibility, Italian left and «grillini» are the dangerous ones. Moreover, there is a process of personalisation of the blame, hence towards Renzi, Zingaretti and Di Maio. But the blame also falls on certain media products considered partisan, such as *Report* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, as expressions of elitist left-wing interests. No solutions to the problem are ever proposed, except lawsuits against its defamers and a vague call for freedom of expression, winking at the non-regulation of platforms.

Likewise, Matteo Salvini speaks almost exclusively of «fake news» to denounce the strategy of his political opponents to attack, defame and censor him, claiming the existence of an alleged «tacit agreement» between the media system and the left. He repeatedly invokes freedom of expression as the only principle to follow when dealing with the problem of online disinformation on social platforms, as people can recognise the truth, as well as in order to avoid bodies of «censorship». On this topic, he publishes numerous videos where he appears visibly furious, particularly in European institutional arenas, where in a Euro-parliamentary debate he yells with charismatic attitudes «In my opinion, you people are not normal!» (see Figure a7), relating to the debate on the danger of disinformation and the need for regulation of platforms.

His political narrative thus maintains the characteristics of direct communication with his audience, typical of right-wing populist configurations, through an informal language when he is out of government, and more formal when he becomes the minister of the Interior. Nonetheless, he always tends to bypass traditional channels in order to create a climate of distrust against mainstream political and media institutions and feed negative sentiments towards certain politicised issues. As a matter of fact, on the topic of migration, he criminalises Ngos with blame-personification strategies against Carola Rackete following her trial, maintaining a nationalist and anti-Eu background in his narrative. Like Meloni, he exploits the elitist argument to denounce his political opponents for being «attached to the Parliamentary chair» and not trying to serve «the interest of the nation», thus emphasising a clear separation between the elite and the people. Concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, he appears neutral, although he sometimes uses decontextualised quotes from well-known scientists to address complex issues, such as the safety of vaccines and alternative treatments. Salvini denounces some journalists, (such as Andrea Scanzi and Bianca Berlinguer) for distorting reality and exploiting media visibility to attack him. The attribution of responsibility is almost always ai-

med at the left, personalising the blame in the figure of Renzi and Letta. When the 5Sm-League government falls, the blame is also placed on Conte and Di Maio, who are accused of «rumouring» with the Pd. Here again, solutions alternative to free speech are not proposed; instead, he believes that the issue is not of national and international interest, and the policy agenda should be turned to welfare, economic and labour issues.

Luigi Di Maio randomly uses all possible expressions in order to denounce attacks from political opponents. In his narrative and before his appointment as Minister of Labour and Social Policies, he claims that there is a silent collaboration between the Italian left (especially the Pd) and some newspapers (such as *la Repubblica*) to spread false news against him and his party. The argumentative strategies are mainly elitist, denouncing a desire on the part of the ruling politicians to maintain their «privileges» and to serve the interests of parliamentarians, lobbies and the Eu, rather than the citizens. As a mirror, Di Maio also attacks Salvini and the League following the fall of the Conte I government, denouncing them as responsible for the government crisis and alluding to their allegiance to the «strong powers» (see Figure a8).

The language used assume striking tones, through direct communication between him, his party and the Italian citizens. He often invites users to avoid reading national newspapers, discrediting them as «biased» and «distorting reality», directing them to only consult the Internet. But it is limited to the online pages and blogs of the 5Sm adherents, meant as the only source of truth. On the media argumentation, he also attacks the fact-checkers, describing them as «Pd's censors», largely personalising and criminalising Renzi. He does not present solutions, but repeatedly invokes freedom of expression, new communication tools and direct democracy, thus defending the core values of the 5Sm. Despite this, as he moves from Labour minister to Foreign Affairs minister, and especially during the pandemic, Di Maio adopts formal language tones and invites citizens to calmness and trust in public institutions, directing them to consult reliable news to counter the widespread infodemic. However, his aggressive communication dynamics returned during the referendum campaign regarding the downsizing of the Italian parliament, thus resuming argumentative strategies against the elite and emphasising the gap between «them» and the people. In 2021, there are no references to disinformation.

Matteo Renzi associates the term «fake news» with two recurrent synonyms, such as «lies» and «falsehoods» disseminated against him. The term «disinformation» is used to denounce a dense organised network of online groups, which coordinately produce and disseminate ad hoc fabricated fake news to attack his person, his allies, and also his family. He describes this strategy as a «mud machine» made up of «trolls» enlisted by opponents,

especially by 5Sm exponents, fuelling online hatred in users' social discussions. Renzi often associates the topic of disinformation with hate speech. His main argument is that disinformation strategies are implemented to distort reality, to defame political opponents, in order to steer voters towards populist factions and win elections. This can be seen in his repeated expression at the end of several of his posts: «they won with fake news, they will be defeated by reality» (see Figure a9), alluding mainly to the 5Sm exponents.

Renzi's argumentative strategies are mainly political- and value-oriented through a mostly formal language, stating that disinformation is a strategy typically adopted by populist political parties, from which he continually distances himself because it clashes with his principles and values. Actually, he exploits the Morisi scandal to affirm this position, appealing to the respect of the person involved and inviting users to not attack the «advocate of the Beast», more often defined as «the hate machine». He declares awareness of the dangerousness of the phenomenon too late, which is the cause of his political decline. However, he «does not give up» and, unlike his predecessors, Renzi outlines some solutions to the issue: he appreciates the work of fact-checkers, he acknowledges the importance of debunking, he suggests the removal of pages that spread fake news and hatred on social media, and he even suggests institutional interventions on the issue. At the same time, it recalls the salience of information pluralism in the digital media system, which must be protected and safeguarded from the threats posed by the dynamics of disseminating disinformation content. On the Covid-19 topic, he speaks lightly and cautiously, urging people to trust institutional communications.

Maria Elena Boschi mainly uses the term «fake news», often associating it with hate speech and, similarly to Renzi, she denounces attacks and defamations against her and her family members. 5Sm's members are blamed for these strategies, and later also the League' members during the Conte I government. It represents the «government of fake news», which has built electoral consensus and power through aggressive and pervasive disinformation tactics. Boschi highlights their unfulfilled promises and the shirking of her proposals, which have been widely discredited and vilified by her political opponents in the past, also using the same expression as Renzi: «They won with fake news, they will be defeated by reality» (see figure 10).

In common with Renzi, she publicly states the need to take action on the issue, because society needs to develop «antibodies» against rampant disinformation. Besides recalling her engagement on the issue in the appropriate European fora, she is the first signatory of the proposal to set up a parliamentary commission of investigation on fake news, described by her brief narrative as a real risk for Western democracies. Finally, her arguments are always

political employing a formal linguistic register, to which she associates a value framework based on respect, tolerance and the safeguarding of democratic principles. Despite this, beyond the proposal on the institutionalisation of the commission, she does not propose any further strategies of intervention and regulation, other than generic exhortations to take action on the issue.

6. Conclusions

The analysis developed examines the three research questions posed in order to understand why there is a lack of intervention on the part of the Italian political system, compared to a considerable commitment on the part of the Agcom, its involvement at the European level, and the configuration of a co-regulatory approach on the part of the European legislature. As a matter of fact, research (Gorwa 2019; De Blasio and Selva 2021; Morlino 2021) and national and European public institutions (Barbieri *et al.* 2021) have already recognised the tangible risk of manipulation arising from disinformation strategies, whose prevention and counteraction requires an effective regulatory framework (Rochefort 2020; Di Mascio *et al.* 2021b), declining the basic principles of Western democracies within the complex architectures of digital platforms (Christie 2018; Van Dijck *et al.* 2018). However, the narrative of Italian politicians observed seems to confirm a perception of the phenomenon that is superficial and inadequate for the implementation of fit-for-purpose policy interventions (Selva 2021; Di Mascio *et al.* 2021a).

The analysis shows the confluence of the selected 5 politicians' patterns, i.e., that disinformation represents an instrument of insinuation and discredit in order to attack political opponents and gain electoral consensus. The perceived danger mainly concerns the political dimension, competition between parties, strategies of personalisation of blame, elitist discourses that exasperate the separation between the privileged and the people, as well as the sedimentation of negative feelings towards certain widely debated topics (such as the politicised issue of migration) and emerging ones (such as the issue of health and vaccines linked to the Covid-19 pandemic). These are typical aspects of populist configurations, which are also exploited by the Italian centre-left as a counter-attack strategy. However, they differ on how to intervene. Meloni, Salvini and Di Maio recognise the problem but do not consider it appropriate to intervene through a regulatory approach, because this would entail the risk of building a censorship body dominated by an alleged lobby made up of the «goodist» left and the media-digital system, emphasising typically sovereigntist sentiments. Renzi and Boschi consider it opportune to find countermeasu-

res, as well as to generate salience on the issue and promote media and digital literacy tools, but without going into the specific nature of the topic. Probably in order to avoid the risk of further attacks, as all possible regulation strategies have strengths and weaknesses elements. Infodemics lead to a decrease in the salience of the topic in the political debate, the decline of which could be induced by the emergence of new issues, but also by an awareness of avoiding the topic in the agenda-building process.

The findings confirm an inert politics in countering disinformation strategies but devote to feeding a fragmented public opinion (Barberá 2020), through the polarization and consequential radicalisation of online debate. Italian politicians seem to underestimate the Western democracies' vulnerability to the risks posed by online disinformation (Tenove 2020; Di Mascio *et al.* 2021a), including the threat to the self-determination of polity, to fair electoral processes, and to the public and political discourse. The contemporary information system appears to be challenged by a disruptive «disinformation order» (Bennet and Livingstone 2018), whose strategies are amplified by an excessive amount of info-content regarding the course of events (Krafft and Donavan 2020). The current techno-social system that governs information is hybrid and heterogeneous (Chadwick 2017), where a multitude of state and non-state actors fluidly and interdependently interplay, through continuous processes of shaping news with additional frames or meanings. In this synchronic expansion of the media-digital information system, a common factual base is lost (Chadwick *et al.* 2018), configuring an «epistemic cynicism» among users (McKay and Tenove 2021), as they are both diffident to processes of shared construction of meaning and unmotivated in tracing proven factual narratives. Within this framework, the co-regulatory framework of digital platforms implemented by European institutions is imperative, whose policy outcome will be the cornerstone for the future of the core values of Western democracies.

This work contributes to the existing body of research, in order to consolidate the analysis of counter-disinformation policies in the Italian case, thanks to a critical-discursive approach on social media. In this scenario, Italian politicians have exploited the issue of online disinformation, leading to the failure of any national counter policy attempts. The various effects confirm the ongoing trend of political polarisation, which could undermine the public trust in democratic institutions. Moreover, the use of social media has reinforced the pervasiveness of social-media political communication, converting the tricky issue of online disinformation into a leverage strategy to attack political opponents. Future research could test these results through the realisation of semi-structured interviews with politicians and practitioners, thus exploring new expla-

nations for the Italian political approach to the online disinformation issue, as well as comparatively analysing the Italian case with other Eu countries.

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