

The role of information during the pandemic

June 23, 2021

A face-to-face meeting with Ferruccio de Bortoli, a journalist with proven experience and professionalism who reflected with the public on the role of correct information in contrast to the rampant wave of misinformation and infodemic

The FBK for Health webinar series ended with fireworks. In recent months, it had offered a tight calendar of events on Covid-19 dedicated to both medical staff and a to a wider lay audience looking to finally hear knowledgeable and authoritative speakers. And there could not have been someone better than **Ferruccio de Bortoli** for the final remarks of this journey in the name of information and quality culture. **A professional journalist since 1975**, de Bortoli directed Corriere della Sera twice, from 1997 to 2003 and from 2009 to 2015 and Sole-24 Ore from 2005 to 2009. **He has written for La Stampa, Corriere della Sera and Corriere del Ticino. He is currently president of Vidas and of the Longanesi publishing house.**

“I am only a journalist”, he began by saying, showing right away the humility that often those who actually have the right and the skills to speak show while those who do not have them usually do not. Yet we all still bear the fresh wounds of information that during the pandemic did great damage, contributing to the disorientation of a people already weakened by an unprecedented and burdensome situation. **In fact, information has lately turned to sensationalism and clickbaiting, churning out headlines and news whose main purpose has been to attract superficial and easily vulnerable readers.**

The prevailing need to have sudden responses to reassure people and provide guidance to decision makers grappling with the most serious post-war contingency did not help: good information, the fruit of serious, reliable, authoritative journalism, of course, needs time to check facts and to correctly analyze the sources. Those who do it have a deep respect for the truth and take responsibility for what they say and transpose on the pages of a newspaper or a website and on the frequencies of a radio.

But in a world of instant, real-time communication, fact-checking is inevitably sacrificed and the quality of the resulting information goes far beyond the information organizations themselves.

Traditional twentieth century journalism to which the speaker belongs, has now assumed a very marginal role within the so-called **infosphere**, to quote Luciano Floridi: professional journalists, today, reside in a lateral loop of the universe of information, while in the last century they were at the center. Now the network and its users self-produce news that spreads more than quality information, with a greater degree of pervasiveness and spread. On the bright side, the network eliminates distances, cancels costs and lets people interact, making available content that was once hard to access with the same degree of abundance and usability. But there is also a “dark side of the moon”: it has suddenly raised everyone to the level of “presumably skilled”, developing an ego hypertrophy that leads us to think of ourselves as being able to deduce everything by casually scrolling through news found by clicking here and there, almost never verified.

Thus a new pandemic has been generated: an infodemic, which does not originate in bats or armadillos but between the keys of a keyboard and infects everyone because – at least at this time – it has very few restrictions. An article recently published in the New England Journal of Medicine suggests that a medical approach should be applied to information, i.e. that the same epidemiological models used to study the virus – formulated, in Italy, by researchers from the FBK Health Emergencies center – should also be used to tackle the infodemic generated by disinformation and misinformation including real-time surveillance, accurate diagnosis and rapid response, just as if it were a real disease, a virtual cancer. Paradoxically, the network manages to identify the fake news that it generates almost immediately, but the problem is the echo-chambers, very powerful sounding boards that gather users sharing very similar interests, beliefs and convictions that feed exactly what they want to hear, according to complex computer algorithms.

We have become entangled in what de Bortoli defined as the **trap of plausibility**, which basically leads us to believe, to trust content that winks at our personal thoughts and is published and shared by someone we know, who maybe we think high of and we trust. And the fake news, whether total or partial, is served!

Especially in the first wave of the pandemic in March 2020, it was found that many fake news that infested the network had been spread by bots or by totally anonymous sources often located in non-democratic countries such as Russia, China and Venezuela and this puts us in front of an ethical and deontological urgency that impacts us all: we have learned that online anonymity spreading conspiracy theories can no longer be allowed, even if in the past it has often been defended as a form of protection for individual freedom of expression. But now, perhaps, this needs to be rethought, in light of recent events and the momentum that the new media have been gaining.

On the other hand, however, not generalizing is equally important: despite the mistakes made by the different media, it cannot be denied that, during the recent crisis, various professional skills have emerged that have helped science, doctors and even politics to face with pragmatism an unprecedented situation and to tell the country in the emergency, pointing out how profound and positive, despite everything, our social capital is.

We should keep in mind that there are many types of press, many professional profiles that have different media outlets with different stories, skills and purposes behind them. So, information is a long chain in which official communications are accompanied by contradictory statements, personalisms and data sometimes provided by the institutions themselves.

Perhaps, the biggest mistake was omitting to explain to the layman audience that the scientific method is a process that proceeds by deductions that undergo multiple and very severe tests, verifications, disputes by a court of peers. It is usually a necessarily limited context heated by strong debates among the experts themselves the place where doubt and uncertainty are

welcomed and all their dark sides explored. During the pandemic, instead, experts were excessively spectacularized; they were transformed into characters who were asked for truth and granite certainties impossible to be provided in such a situation, not to mention that they were often questioned even on issues beyond their specific fields of expertise.

The Scientific Committee itself should have explained what scientific uncertainty is and why it must be respected and not pressed. The problem is the void of information that is originated, which immediately fills the network by suggesting alternative answers that we cannot afford. Today we are no longer allowed to say “we do not know yet”, “zero risk does not exist in any human activity”, “we may have to take back what we are saying”. **We should, instead, get used to the inevitability of a culture of risk, admit mistakes made, profess ignorance as Socrates did with his “I know I don’t know” before the jury that sentenced him to death.**

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