



Information pollution as social harm: investigating the digital drift of medical misinformation in a time of crisis

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Introduction

- A time of *krisis*
- Context of cyber harms
- Infodemic vs fake news vs information pollution

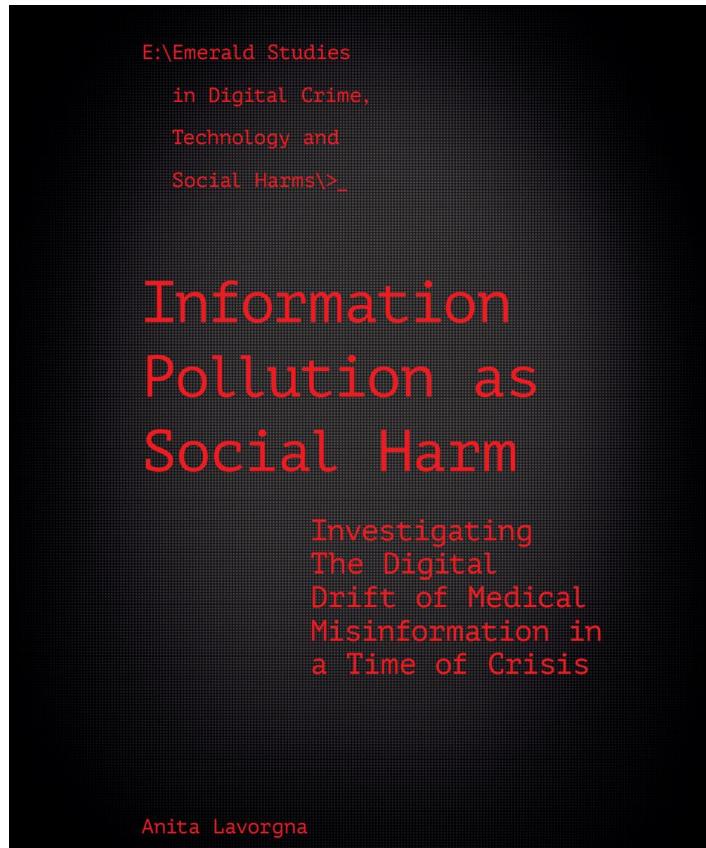
Why looking at social harms?

- “Stretching” the discipline a bit
- Harms in criminology/zemiology
- Misalignment between criminal law and harmful (or potentially harmful) antisocial behaviours
- Moral (but also collective, or corporate) responsibility
- Part of a broader research agenda started in 2015



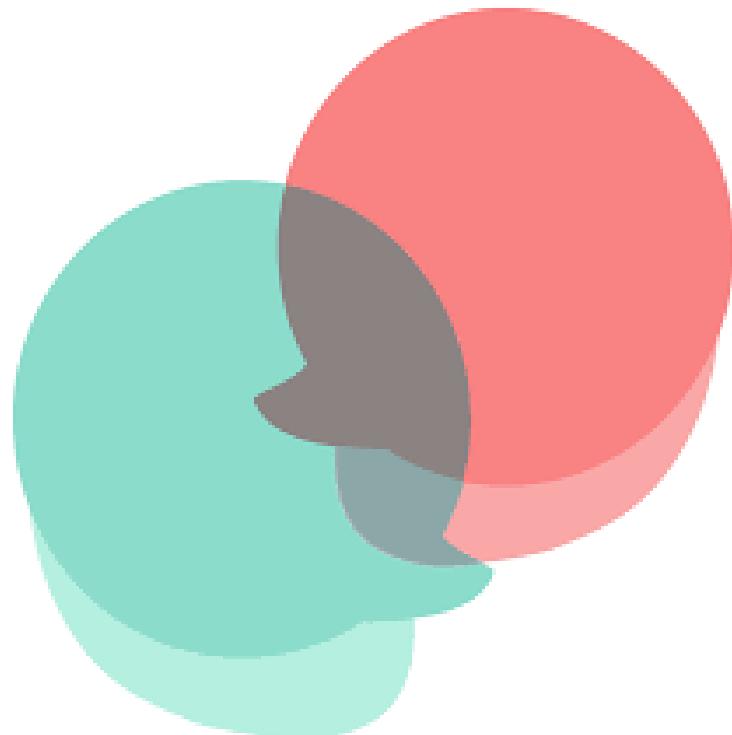
Frank started to get a funny feeling that his doctor was a quack.

Methodological approach



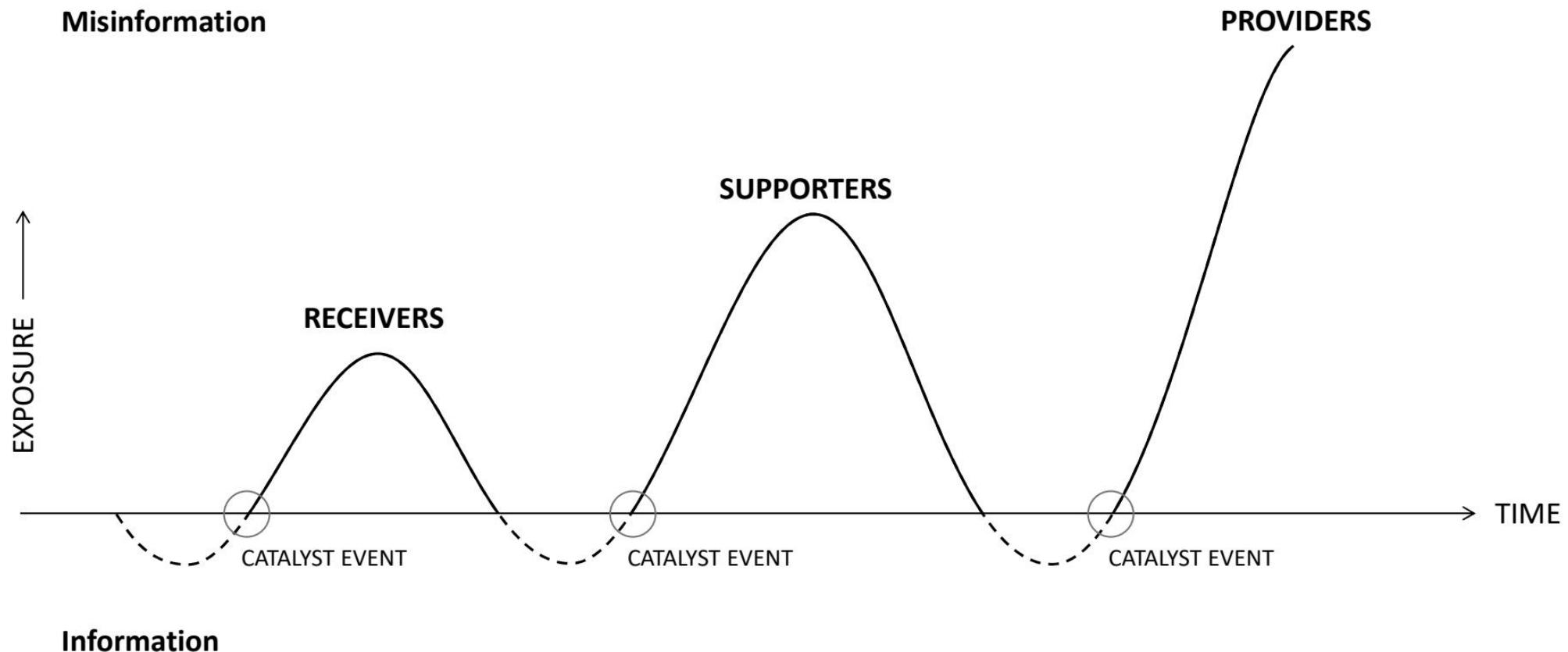
- Importance to retain a space for qualitative analyses of smaller datasets focusing on interpretative and critical approaches («dual city» metaphor)
- Social learning + psychological mechanisms addressing science denial (micro)
- Social learning + cultural approaches (micro/meso)
- Virtual ethnography + narrative interviews (ethical issues)

Drifting into health-related polluted information: an integrated approach



- Assumption that there is not a pervasive rigid social structure defining conformity deviance
- Drift (Matza); digital drift (Goldsmith & Brewer; Holt et al.)
- Identity construction
- Cultural criminology perspective (transgression)

Building identities and networks through converging frames



Receivers, supporters and providers

- Receivers
 - The silent majority, tend to be bystanders
 - Clustering in transit and loosely formed collectives
 - Do not recognise themselves as potentially victims
 - Likely to divulge misinformation among friends and acquaintances
 - For them, it is not about transgression

Receivers, supporters and providers

- Supporters
 - Ambivalent role (both victims *and* offenders)
 - Heterogeneous group
 - Creating content
 - They were once receivers; some will become/are providers
 - Catalytic event
 - Member hierarchies; some are building a professional identity

Receivers, supporters and providers

- Providers
 - Testing existing typology (Lavorgna and Horsburgh): utilitarian providers; custodial providers (good faith; egoistical fake); sexual abusers; delusional providers
 - Declared motivations (autobiographical accounts)
 - Search for financial profit
 - Education and training

Conspiratorial ideation and epistemic mistrust

- Conspiratorial-led narratives (mass-control, surveillance, QAnon, ...)
 - *“I am proud of being labelled as a conspiratorial thinker, if that means defending Liberty and Truth”*
- Importance to look at individual and group attitudes and behaviors
- The epistemic authority of modern science is challenged
 - Alternative and experiential knowledge-building process
 - Peer validation
 - Confirmation bias, myside bias, belief perseverance
 - Alternative publication channels

A portrait painting of Galileo Galilei, an Italian polymath and a prominent figure in the Scientific Revolution. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark robe over a white collared shirt. He has a long, bushy grey beard and is looking slightly to his left with a thoughtful expression. The background is dark and indistinct.

Narratives of the self

I am the expert!

- Trying to get more recognition and status in the group
- Insinuating doubts
- They are denied a place in the debate
- Careful crafting of sciency identities
- Transgressive, heretics

Covidioti

"IL VACCINO
CI SALVERÀ"

SE NON FAI IL VACCINO
MI METTI A RISCHIO

"L'OMS DICE LA
VERITÀ ASSOLUTA

IL PICCO ANCORA
DEVE ARRIVARE

MA IL M5-S È DIVERSO
DAGLI ALTRI

'CONTE PREMIER'

#IO RESTO A CASA

PIÙ LOCKDOWN PERCHÈ
NON LO ABBIAMO
RISPETTATO

#ANDRÀ TUTTO
BENE

"BASTA NEGAZIONISTI
E COMPLOTTISTI"

"OSPEDALI PIENI..
TERAPIE INTENSIVE A
BERGAMO

"INDOSSATE LA
MASCHERINA"

BILL GATES È UN FILANTROPO
VUOLE IL NOSTRO BENE

Narratives of the self

Outgroup hostility and ingroup belonging

- “Us vs them” oppositional narrative
- Stigmatised identities turned into positive ones
- Insulting and derogatory terms, use of ridicule
- “Bad science” imagery
- Search for recognition + asserting individual selves
- Vs echo chambers and filter bubbles metaphors

Narratives of the self

Politics of (negative) freedoms

- 3V Movement
- Anti-government and radical-right movement
- Transversal theme of freedom
- Moral and religious conservatism on civil liberties matters
- Immigration



Agency and empowerment

- My body, my self
 - Trying to re-establish a sense of control
 - Emphasis of individual responsibility in terms of health
 - Promotion of healthy lifestyles but also dangerous behaviours
 - Negationism

Agency and empowerment

- Spirituality
 - Spirituality as important factor for wellbeing and coping strategies
 - Some groups with spiritualistic focus
 - Reassurance
 - Problem: spiritualism presented as in opposition to science-based approaches

Agency and empowerment

- Privacy and self-disclosure
 - Value of privacy as a matter of concern
 - Tension with publication of potentially sensitive information
 - Self-disclosure gets the upper hand with privacy concerns
 - Health as a (semi)public experience



Drifting off the polluted pathway

- Contexts of crossdisciplinarity
- Juggling divergent needs
- Recognizing the maze



- Implications for communicating science
- Implications for criminology

Q & A