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## The Covid-19 News Narrative: The Case of Italian Media

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### Abstract.

The aim of this work is to study news narratives on the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. Its point of departure is the accusation that scholars and institutions such as the WHO levelled against media outlets around the world for creating a drift defined as “infodemic”: too many news items in circulation that are not properly verified or are deliberately misleading. During the pandemic, media outlets in Italy as elsewhere were accused of oversimplifying messages from the scientific community and experts, creating effects such as undue alarmism in the population. I will assess the accuracy of this accusation by analysing articles published in Italian news outlets, focusing specifically on elements in news narratives whose conformation makes them prone to a high degree of simplification: namely, headlines and ancillary content such as teasers appearing in social networks. As I will show, even in the context of the pandemic, distinctions must be made between unwarranted journalistic simplifications, which border on unfounded news, and simplifications that, on the contrary, allow content in the public interest to reach a larger number of readers, thus heightening the level of awareness of pandemic-related issues. My thesis is that in the context of the digital public sphere, linguistic and conceptual simplification is sometimes necessary, and that it is therefore appropriate to distinguish between cases that produce beneficial effects for public understanding of a phenomenon such as Covid-19 from those that can be classified as infodemic.

**Keywords:** coronavirus, headlines, infodemic, Italy, newspapers

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the accuracy of news narratives in a few of Italy’s major newspapers during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. My point of departure is the accusation levelled at news outlets around the world, widely supported by scientific data and evidence, of having caused the spread of an ‘information virus’ called ‘infodemic.’ The idea advanced by scholars, commentators, and the World Health Organization is that during the pandemic the media increased alarmism in the population by publishing too much news about Covid-19 and, above all, too many news items that were inadequately verified.

I position the issue of infodemic within the larger context of news communications on social networks. Within this framework, I show that during the pandemic, processes that had been

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

underway for years – associated with the shift of news information onto digital platforms – became more acute. I then argue that the characteristics of these platforms, tied to the speeding up of communicative flows, sometimes make it necessary for mass media to simplify messages intended to disseminate content of public interest to the population at large. This may also apply to a pandemic situation.

In my opinion, it is therefore necessary to make distinctions between cases of journalistic simplification that are legitimate and those that are not. I do this by analysing news content regarding Covid-19 published on the social media pages of major Italian newspapers. As we shall see, in some cases the linguistic and conceptual simplification of this content did not distort the information and, indeed, contributed to bringing a wider audience closer to topics of general interest. In other cases, however, the use of overly simplified and even sensationalist headlines and teasers was unjustified and can be classified as ‘infodemic’.

## 2. Infodemic

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has had a significant impact on both the practices and language of journalism, in some cases exacerbating trends that had already been visible for some time. These trends are linked to the gradual shift of information consumption onto the Web and especially onto social networks.

From the point of view of agenda setting, the pandemic has required the mass media to communicate an enormous amount of scientific knowledge (Papapicco, 2020). It should be noted that reports of scientific studies on Covid-19 were also considered ‘news’. As the pandemic progressed and scientific study of a new virus advanced, scientific articles in academic journals multiplied. These articles were also clearly of interest to the general population, making it necessary for them to be disseminated in some fashion through mass media. However, studies published in the preprint archives of international scientific journals were transmitted through the media as if they were certain and proven studies (Gazendam et al. 2020).

This overabundance of news about the virus led even the World Health Organization to use the term ‘infodemic’ (Rothkopf, 2003): an excessive circulation of inaccurate and poorly verified news about the virus by the media – an ‘information virus’ that sowed panic and made it difficult for people to get their bearings in the midst of the health crisis (Cinelli et al, 2020; PAHO, 2020 Lovari). As a consequence, we have witnessed a proliferation of inaccurate and overly spectacularised news narratives in this context (Perdoni, 2020). As regards Italy, the effects of this drift towards infodemic have been visible and documented by several studies. Already in the first months of the pandemic, Covid-19 had monopolised Italian newspapers, with about 70% of the articles in major newspapers referring to the coronavirus (Bermejo, 2020). Furthermore, a study showed that Italians informed themselves about the virus on a daily basis to a greater extent than citizens of other countries: this greater exposure to news about the virus also corresponded to an overall increase in misinformation rates among Italians (AGCOM, 2020). Misinformation about the virus found its way especially into social media. This also involved articles in mainstream newspapers published on platforms such as

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

Facebook: one report showed that misinformation about the virus in Italy particularly concerned topics such as cures and treatments, and that this also took place on the social network pages of major national newspapers (Fact, 2020).

Can we therefore say that we witnessed a wave of fake news during the pandemic? Or, vice versa, that the news narrative on Covid-19 should be more problematized and framed within more complex conceptual categories? It is undeniable that the coronavirus crisis generated an information overload (an expression coined by Toffler, 1971). All of this took place in the digital communication setting, which, even before the pandemic, had significantly altered the way newspapers conveyed news to the public. First and foremost, information overload, increasingly pronounced on social media, causes users' attention threshold to drop dramatically on these platforms (Citton 2014; Campo, 2020). This leads news outlets to 'speed up' their messages, that is, to make them more immediately understandable, with the goal of winning the relentless battle for attention and thereby maximising clicks and revenues. Messages are speeded up mostly by simplifying them: this is particularly true for the headlines and teasers on social media, which have to summarise in just a few words information and concepts and that are often intricate and complex.

In a controversial but significant book, Alessandro Baricco wrote about 'quick-truth', an expression he uses to describe the post-truth era (Kakutani 2018, McIntyre 2019), specifically as it relates to information overload and the accelerating dynamics of digital technologies (Baricco, 2018). Baricco defines quick-truth as 'truth that has been redesigned to be aerodynamic in order to reach the surface of the world; that is, in order to be easily understood and catch people's attention. What it loses in precision and exactitude, it gains in brevity and speed' (Baricco, 2020: 168-69). Baricco makes the point that in communications on digital platforms (including news), it is sometimes permissible for newspapers to synthesize and simplify messages, even to the point of making them partially inaccurate, in order to win the 'battle for attention' and disseminate content of public interest to a broad-based readership. This method of dissemination can therefore be legitimate in certain cases – if it serves to bring to people's attention topics relevant to public discussion that would otherwise be overwhelmed by the news flow on social platforms.

As predicted early on by Baudrillard (1972, 1976), the overload of stimuli and immaterial signs typical of the digital world creates a 'hyperreality' in which simulacra take the place of material references. This happens in part because these immaterial signs circulate at an ever-increasing speed, to the point that the human mind is able to absorb only a small portion of them. Bringing all this back to news headlines, in this paper I refer specifically to linguistic signs, which, because they remain in the accelerated environment of social networks, often lack an objective referent. The linguistic signs themselves are simulacrum. Another reason this happens is because there is simply too much information circulating on digital platforms (and on social networks in particular). As a consequence, the only way to allow this content to reach users' attention is to present it in a simplified way. Newspapers, as we shall see in connection with headlines and other content relating to Covid-19, are therefore 'forced' in some way to make some headlines travel more quickly through the infosphere (Floridi, 2009).

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

### 3. Public Debate on Social Media

The process described above, tied to the way headlines are used to speed up the news, should not be framed solely in terms of commercial competition between newspapers in pursuit of clicks. Another theme clearly stands out. The fact that news is read mainly on social networks implies that the latter constitute a new public sphere, because these are the spaces where public debate takes form, which has always been fuelled by information and its exploitation. The fact that this is, according to Habermas' classic categorization (1962), an 'ephemeral public sphere', made up of episodic conversations, does not detract from the need to construct a public debate as fully informed as possible through these tools and on these platforms.

Clearly, if gamification and the processes of acceleration described above tend to diminish users' reflective and critical-argumentative capacities, and if users see nothing but soft news before them, without ever having access to more serious information, then public debate loses substance, to the point of jeopardizing the dialogical principles through which a democracy should function. Even the most serious and committed information can hardly be placed at an ethical level that is completely disconnected from the aesthetic, ludic, and emotional level that dominates the social paradigm. Doing so destines it to not reaching the general public. And if the general public is only reached by information of poor quality, on topics that do not pertain to the public sphere, the quality of debate and democracy is compromised. Language plays a decisive role in this process.

Choosing to convey information on topics of public interest through partly imprecise headlines is therefore necessary at times in order to allow a large number of users to access the public sphere. In short, news on subjects of public interest must travel at the same speed as news on non-serious topics, without crossing the line, of course, into expressive and semantic forms that have the sole purpose of deceiving users.

This type of literacy, which comes about through the use of language, must somehow be activated by the tools of gamification (Robson et al., 2015). Several studies in recent years have shown that there is a real 'aesthetic public sphere' that takes into account emotional, affective aspects and that values popular culture as a means to access knowledge, without reducing it to an emblem of the commodification of culture (Jones 2007; Sassatelli 2012). The idea of the aesthetic public sphere attempts to go beyond Habermas' classifications and establishes an interaction, rather than a dichotomy, between the cognitive and emotional realms, as modes of thought that allow access to the public sphere.

In an event such as a pandemic, which disrupts the usual criteria of newsworthiness and drives newspapers to a fierce fight in pursuit of clicks, many newspapers have resorted to linguistic and content-based 'shortcuts' in order to win this battle, moving along the borderline between truth and fake news and using linguistic artifices that simultaneously increase the users' level of panic and the newspapers' number of clicks.

We therefore need to analyse news content to determine in which cases linguistic simplification and 'acceleration' can be considered legitimate, since they serve to disseminate information of public interest, and in which cases they border on mere disinformation. To do

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

so, for my case studies I will take some news headlines, including the teasers that accompany the articles, published by Italian news outlets on their social network pages.

#### 4. Headlines and Teasers in Italian Newspapers: Fake News

Several studies over the years (Young 2017) have demonstrated a link between an overall increase in misinformation and a shift of news production and consumption to the Web (Young 2017). Scholars are divided in their approach to the issue: there are those who maintain, for example, that it is possible to speak about 'facile disinformation', referring to the fact that digital technologies are constructed in such a way as to contain within themselves the tools for unmasking fake news (Paglieri 2020).

As regards Covid-19, the amount of wrong information was not only massive but also dangerous, negatively affecting compliance with prevention measures (Allington & Nayana, 2020) and causing the spread of pseudoscientific theories (Ahmed et al., 2020).

When tackling the subject of Italian news headlines and teasers, then, the cases to be taken into consideration are those in which the simplification of messages goes beyond the bounds of 'warranted imprecision', with the purpose of circulating general interest news amongst a broader audience, and crosses the line into the publication of truly fake news.

I will offer a few examples of headlines and teasers from Italian news outlets to show how they sometimes reached a level of unjustified alarm and sensationalism and can therefore be regarded as an expression of a drift towards infodemic.

The first factor frequently found in teasers is the transmission of a sense of emergency about situations that were not at all emergencies, often concealing the real causal links and the real time frame of the events being reported.

On July 15, 2020, for example, the *Corriere della Sera* (the newspaper with the highest number of paper copies sold in Italy and the second-most-visited news site by online users) included a red dot and the words 'ULTIM'ORA (BREAKING NEWS)' in capital letters in the Facebook teaser of an article about Covid-19. 'Nembro, a child positive for Covid-19 at a summer camp: but he is asymptomatic'.<sup>1</sup> The news, launched on Facebook with the emphatic methods just described, actually referred to events that had occurred the previous day, on July 14. Since the virus understandably increases people's concern, even to the point of anxiety, about what might happen from day to day, presenting information as breaking news that is not increases simultaneously the level of social alarm (by artificially generating an unjustified sense of urgency) and the number of clicks. In this case, it was a matter of a teaser that falsified the true timing of the events. This was an unwarranted simplification, truly fake news, because it presents as breaking news information from the day before that had no 'educational' or 'instructional' function as far as knowledge about the virus is concerned. Its only function was to increase the news outlet's clicks and revenues by means of unjustified sensationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20\\_luglio\\_15/nembro-bambino-positivo-covid-centro-estivo-ma-asintomatico-e5646a1c-c6a4-11ea-a52c-6b2a448f1d2c.shtml?fbclid=IwAR1NHiUzb6zniq6lFDXtmK27f2DzC5T60oh8bIamse7Gu713UaYSkJmbBOA](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_luglio_15/nembro-bambino-positivo-covid-centro-estivo-ma-asintomatico-e5646a1c-c6a4-11ea-a52c-6b2a448f1d2c.shtml?fbclid=IwAR1NHiUzb6zniq6lFDXtmK27f2DzC5T60oh8bIamse7Gu713UaYSkJmbBOA)

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

If we move from article teasers to their headlines, we immediately find confirmation of what I present in the first sections of this paper, namely, that what caused an infodemic was the decision to make known to a broad segment of readers scientific studies on the virus that clearly interested them and could therefore generate clicks and revenues for the newspapers. For this reason in particular, the reporting of studies was often distorted by sensationalist headlines that conveyed the content of the studies inaccurately, often crossing over the border into falsehood.

To give some examples, on April 3, 2020, the newspaper *La Repubblica* (the second-largest paper and the online news site with the largest number of readers in Italy) reported a scientific study according to which under certain conditions the virus could disperse in the air. The study in question referred only to the possible spread of the virus in the air under certain circumstances, such as through aerosols in hospitals with many patients undergoing mechanical ventilation. The study was still under review by the World Health Organization and therefore did not provide absolute certainties. In a classic manoeuvre of journalistic summarising complex information in a headline, *La Repubblica* reported this study on its Facebook page with the following title: ‘The virus also circulates in the air’. This was a simplification whose purpose was to generate alarm and, as a consequence, increase the number of clicks. But at the same time, it was an absolutely unjustified inaccuracy, because not only did it fail to provide greater understanding of the virus for a wider audience, it inculcated in people the (false) idea of a generalized spread of the virus in the air, so that after a few hours *La Repubblica* changed the title to “‘The virus in the air longer than we thought”. The WHO is preparing to review its regulations’.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, there has been heated discussion in Italy on the utility of keeping up curfew measures, that is, stopping people from leaving their houses after a certain hour. In April, Mario Draghi’s government maintained the curfew at 10 p.m., despite protests from right-wing parties (both those in the opposition and those forming part of the government, such as La Lega Nord) and a part of civil society, such as the association of restaurant owners.

In this context, some newspapers reported a scientific study conducted by some of Europe’s leading universities (Oxford, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Bristol, Copenhagen, and Essen) in seven countries, according to which a curfew reduced the contagion index (Rt) by 13%. At that moment in particular a study of the sort clearly had the power to spark discussion and polemics regarding the measures taken by the government. *Huffington Post*, one of the most widely read online newspapers in Italy, titled the article reporting the results of the study on its Facebook page as ‘ “Curfew reduces Rt by 13%”: the results of a European study’.<sup>3</sup> Neither in the article’s headline or subheading, nor in the Facebook teaser, however, was it specified that this was a preprint study, not yet certified by the international scientific community. It even ignored what was written on the site medRxiv.org,<sup>4</sup> in which the study originally appeared: ‘Caution: Preprints are preliminary reports of work that have not

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<sup>2</sup>[https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/04/02/news/\\_il\\_virus\\_circola\\_anche\\_nell\\_aria\\_l\\_oms\\_si\\_prepara\\_a\\_rivedere\\_le\\_norme-252986975/](https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/04/02/news/_il_virus_circola_anche_nell_aria_l_oms_si_prepara_a_rivedere_le_norme-252986975/)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/il-copri fuoco-riduce-lrt-del-13-i-risultati-di-uno-studio-europeo\\_it\\_608a6a43e4b02e74d22399d6](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/il-copri fuoco-riduce-lrt-del-13-i-risultati-di-uno-studio-europeo_it_608a6a43e4b02e74d22399d6)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.medrxiv.org/>

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

been certified by peer review. They should not be relied on to guide clinical practice or health-related behaviour and should not be reported in news media as established information’.

Another circumstance in which Italian newspapers made a bad show of themselves through their Covid-19 articles (especially on social networks), concerned a few deaths that occurred subsequent to the administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The history of this vaccine, as is well known, has been extremely troubled, and in a certain way it seems that the media alarmism in reporting suspicious deaths has also ‘infected’ the United States and regulatory authorities, so much so that there have been precautionary suspensions and different policies on the administration of the vaccine, with some countries inoculating only the elderly and others the entire population. What is certain, in any case, is that the first cases of deaths following vaccination were leveraged by much of the Italian press, which constructed a highly sensationalistic and alarmist narrative around these events. On March 14, 2021, a teacher from Biella, a city in Piedmont, died. The day before he had been vaccinated with AstraZeneca. *Il Messaggero*, one of the most widely read newspapers in Italy, reported the news with a very curt headline aimed to suggest a causal connection between the two events: ‘Teacher dies in Biella after the vaccine. Piedmont suspends Lot ABV5811’.<sup>5</sup> Thus, like other newspapers and similar cases, this headline inculcated into readers’ minds the idea that there could be a correlation between the two events (vaccination and death), even though, at the time, there was no evidence to that effect. Two days after he passed away, an autopsy was carried out: the examination established that there was no link between the AstraZeneca vaccine and his death, which was instead attributed to the sudden onset of a cardiac problem.<sup>6</sup>

It is evident in these examples that in the newspapers’ narrative of Covid-19, in certain cases, the combination of several factors into a simpler formula, the inversion of causal or temporal links, or the total omission of essential information made the news content easier to understand, but with a meaning that distorted the truth of the facts.

## 5. Headlines and Teasers in Italian Newspapers: What Is Not Infodemic

The examples analysed in the previous section show that in Italian newspapers some headlines and teasers on Covid-19 oversimplified information in an undue manner, thus bordering on disinformation. In other cases, though, a different type of simplification allowed content of general interest on the pandemic to reach a wider audience. The same audience, in all likelihood, would not have been reached if the article had been titled and promoted in a non-simplified fashion that was completely accurate and held no emotional appeal for readers. As we have seen, the emotional element is decisive in communication, including journalism, that takes place in the new digital public sphere (Schaefer, 2016), represented in particular by social media: the new virtual places where the construction of messages and meanings takes place. The digital public sphere, as highlighted by some studies (Dahlgren, 2009) is now increasingly

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<sup>5</sup>[https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/astrazeneca\\_professore\\_muore\\_piemonte\\_sospende\\_vaccino\\_cosa\\_e\\_succe-so-5830634.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/astrazeneca_professore_muore_piemonte_sospende_vaccino_cosa_e_succe-so-5830634.html)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2021/03/16/news/deceduto-a-biella-dopo-astrazeneca-l-autopsia-si-e-trattato-di-un-improvviso-problema-cardiaco-nessun-legame-evidente-con-il-vaccino-1.40033885>

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

‘mediatised’, which means that messages and meanings can reach a common, shared dimension only through the narrative provided by mass media.

In certain cases, therefore, information of public interest can only be mediatised through a simplification that makes its wider circulation possible. Let us take a few examples concerning the news narrative about Covid-19 in Italy.

In some cases, a headline’s inaccuracy may come about through ‘subtraction’, by removing some pieces of the information. Specifically, to prompt users to click, some information is left suspended to arouse curiosity, which can only be satisfied by reading the article. This makes the information imprecise but not falsified. Furthermore, raising users’ level of curiosity can spur them towards wanting more complete information, which they can only obtain by reading the whole article. An example of this strategy is to slightly modify the statement made by the protagonist of the news item in such a way that he or she does not express the idea in the quote, while making it clear that the whole statement can be found in the article. So, if the Italian Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH) communicates data on the coronavirus contagion index in Italy and discusses possible scenarios for ending the lockdown, many newspapers on social networks will not headline: ‘Brusaferro: “The contagion index is between 0.2 and 0.7. For the regions this does not imply the need for staggered reopenings”’. Rather, they put: ‘Brusaferro: “Here is what the contagion index is and what the consequences are for reopenings”’.<sup>7</sup> It is an imprecise truth, because the director of the NIH did not say exactly these words; it is a functional periphrasis to stimulate users’ curiosity. By going to the article, the reader will be able to read not only the data, but also perhaps a critical explanation and contextualization of the facts. On the other hand, if the headline had been: ‘Brusaferro: “The contagion index is between 0.2 and 0.7. We are returning to normality”’, the likelihood exists that the reader, satisfied with finding the complete information, would have shared the article, perhaps excited by the idea of the probable end of the lockdown, without going on to read it and understand the full meaning of those data. In this case, then, an imprecise headline on Covid-19 may foster the circulation of information of general interest in a larger segment of the population.

Another issue that has been particularly thorny since the beginning of the pandemic, from the news narrative point of view, concerns the way the statements of virologists, epidemiologists, and infectious disease specialists have been reported. Scientists themselves have expressed opposing ideas on many occasions. The few certainties offered by the scientific literature (owing to the newness and lack of knowledge about the virus) have also fuelled these contradictions: the press was thus given the difficult task of faithfully reporting statements that were sometimes made in an overly simplistic or reckless manner, or in any case that lacked bona fide certainty from the scientific point of view.

In some cases, newspapers used expressions that had become sedimented in the media semiosphere associated with the virus in order to summarise (and partly simplify) statements by virologists or epidemiologists who had not pronounced those exact words. For example,

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<sup>7</sup> Here is a link to an article whose newspaper headline contained the accurate information, but on Facebook was instead titled in the manner described above: <https://www.tpi.it/cronaca/istituto-superiore-sanita-ultimi-aggiornamenti-dati-24-aprile-2020-20200424591647/>



10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

towards the end of July 2020, Professor Andrea Crisanti, a well-known Italian scientist, spoke about the risks that Italy ran in the immediate future. He invited people to be more cautious during their summer vacations to stop the pandemic from reaching the alarming thresholds that were already beginning to be seen in other European countries (such as France and Spain). In this general call for caution Crisanti said: ‘We think that we will not have problems with the coronavirus in October-November, as was assumed, but sooner, at the end of August’. On social media and elsewhere, most newspapers headlined as follows: ‘Crisanti: “Possible second wave at the end of August”’.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, this is a simplification in which a sort of semantic *a priori* is applied, by using a concept (namely, second wave) that is thoroughly prevalent in public debate and enclosing it within a phrase that instead simply anticipates potential problems in a month’s time. The fact remains that if the newspapers had headlined: ‘Crisanti: “We could have problems by the end of August”’, the emotional impact would have been so mild that, in all likelihood, the content would have gone almost unnoticed in the sea of information on social networks. The result is that the real objective of Crisanti’s statement would have gone equally unnoticed, that is, the appeal to caution in view of the summer to prevent upsurges of the virus. In this case, all things considered, the simplification and emphasis were for a good cause.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, we can return to the subject of scientific studies on Covid-19 and how they have been reported by the Italian press. In the previous section, we considered journalistic simplifications that bordered on fake news.

Now, analysing an opposite case, that of a legitimate simplification, we can take as an example a study conducted by the Benioff Children’s Hospitals of the University of California at San Francisco UCSF, published in July 2021 in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. The study analysed a sample of 8,400 subjects between the ages of 18 and 25, ultimately determining that 33% of males in that age group and 30% of females were ‘clinically vulnerable to the virus’. Obviously, this formula indicated that the virus could have clinical effects in younger people (such as to lead to hospitalization), and that therefore at least one in three could develop significant symptoms. However, it was not made explicit – probably because it was impossible to predict on the basis of the available data – whether the disease could then have serious consequences on those who were subject to possible hospitalization. *La Repubblica* and other newspapers reported the study with this headline: ‘Covid, US Study: one young person in three can get seriously ill’.<sup>9</sup> The simplification of the study results and the consequent forced interpretation of the headline are clear. However, it should be noted that the susceptibility of young people to the virus was at the time a clear issue of public interest: it was during the summer holidays; the greatest dangers of new outbreaks came from groups of young people and nightlife; the same data on contagions indicated that increasingly younger people were now being infected. Partially forced headlines made the American study reach the attention of a

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.today.it/attualita/coronavirus-seconda-ondata-agosto.html>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/salute/medicina-e-ricerca/2020/07/13/news/covid\\_studio\\_usa\\_un\\_giovane\\_su\\_3\\_puo\\_ammalarsi\\_gravemente-261834400/](https://www.repubblica.it/salute/medicina-e-ricerca/2020/07/13/news/covid_studio_usa_un_giovane_su_3_puo_ammalarsi_gravemente-261834400/)

10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

much higher number of readers, including young people, which would not have happened if the headlines had referred to a generic 'clinical susceptibility'. Furthermore, headlines of this sort also certainly prompted many people, including younger ones, to read the articles (because they were legitimately concerned about what the headlines said) and to better understand the details of the research study. The overall effect of the move was not to spread unfounded alarmism but to urge greater caution, and the simplification of the concept in the headlines helped in that endeavour.

In conclusion, I have offered an analysis of how Italian newspapers performed in reporting the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. We began with the accusation directed against all forms of media that they promoted an 'infodemic' drift. As I have shown, this drift is nothing more than a more advanced version of processes that had already been underway for several years, related to the shift of information production and consumption onto the Web, especially onto social media. However, the accelerating dynamics of communication on these platforms demand a more accurate analysis of the situation, to differentiate between warranted and unwarranted journalistic simplifications regarding Covid-19. Since only high-impact messages succeed in capturing the attention of social media users, sometimes even information of public interest must be communicated with simplified headlines and teasers, thereby allowing these new articles to circulate more widely.

In the case of Covid-19, therefore, the journalistic inaccuracies and simplifications made by the Italian press are not always to be condemned. In some cases, newspapers certainly provoked excessive alarmism with the sole purpose of increasing clicks and revenues, with no view to public interest. In others, however, headlines and teasers were simplified without bordering on fake news and disinformation. Although formulated with a 'commercial intent' (to increase article views), they also made information of public interest available to a wider range of people. In these cases, journalistic simplifications about Covid-19 do not enter into the infodemic paradigm.

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10-12 September, 2021

Zurich, Switzerland

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