A Digital Picture to Hold Us Captive? A Flusserian Interpretation of Misinformation Sharing on Social Media

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ABSTRACT: In this article I investigate online misinformation from a media philosophy perspective. I, thus move away from the debate focused on the semantic content, concerned with what is true or not about misinformation. I argue rather that online misinformation is the effect of an informational climate promoted by user micro-behaviours such as liking, sharing, and posting. Misinformation online is explained as the effect of an informational environment saturated with and shaped by techno-images in which most users act automatically under the constant assault of stirred emotions, a state resembling what media philosopher Vilém Flusser has called techno-magical consciousness. I describe three ways in which images function on social media to induce this distinctive, uncritical mode of consciousness, and complement Flusser's explanation with insights from the phenomenology of emotions.

KEY WORDS: misinformation, magical consciousness, techno-images, digital images, online emotions, Flusser, social media, critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

It is Saturday evening and you have nothing to do. You grab your phone to see what is happening out there. Facebook shows you recent pictures posted by your friends having fun, and you may get that feeling of missing out on something extraordinary—at least the pictures seem to point out that there is an amazing life to be lived out there. Staying on Facebook, you can check the "events nearby" tab, decorated with lively pictures and banners enticing you to join for an unforgettable experience. Your maps app shows you nearby restaurants and clubs, and if you click on the name of the place, pictures

posted by other users appear so you can try to get a feel of the vibe. You can also spend an entire evening scrolling through your Instagram or Pinterest feed, letting your eyes feast on the spectacle of lavish images of exotic places, exquisite dining experiences, inspirational quotes framed with emoticons, people doing cool things in remote places, and so on. You could move on to scrolling through pictures of people on a dating app, swiping left and right, feeling that you are closer to perfect strangers because you looked at their profile pictures. No matter what social media platform you may choose to use, your experience of it is overwhelmingly visual. You interact with pictures, you post pictures, you evaluate situations and opportunities through images.

With some obvious exceptions, such as user forums or question-and-answer communities, social media[1] has been colonised by images. Why would this be a problem, in any way? For decades now, the offline world has already been filled with images, as pointed out by media philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) in a lecture delivered in the '70s: "Our world has become colorful. . . . Walls covered with posters, buildings, shop windows, vegetable tins, underpants, umbrellas, magazines, photographs, films, and TV programs are all in resplendent technicolor" (Flusser 2013: 91). Flusser draws our attention to the fact that the world was less colourful before the advent of photography in the nineteenth century but that, also, images were much scarcer before mass photography. We no longer inhabit the same experiential realm as that of our ancestors: we live in a world shaped by images whereas, previously, the world was shaped by texts. Social media, in its brief life, has replicated at a faster pace the media evolution of the offline world: from the text-heavy platforms in the beginning of the 90s, to the lavishly rich images of the current social media apps. However, as Flusser pointed out, we do not just experience images as some decorative addition to our world, but images are the main carriers of messages or, rather, the most uncontested messages we receive in our daily lives. This makes images powerful carriers of truth and falsity: "The majority of the messages that inform us about the world . . . [are] currently irradiated by the surfaces that surround us" (Flusser 2013: 91). The function of images as carriers of messages has an important consequence for social media: it can help facilitate both the spreading of genuine information as well as of misinformation.

Hanging out on social media is now a favourite pass-time activity for many people owning a computer or a smart phone. But social media is also a terrain for spreading misinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. In an ironic way, social media represents the end of the utopian dream of the Internet as a democratic avenue for sharing information. The World Wide Web started in the 1970s as small-scale network of connected computers between several universities with the aim of sharing information which was supposed to ultimately lead to more knowledge creation. The Internet was greeted as bearing a new democratic potential since its decentralised design, resembling a rhizomatic structure (Hardt

and Negri 2000) does not allow for a single point of control. On the Internet, everyone's voices could be heard—in principle at least, therefore high hopes were placed on this new medium. In practice, this has led to the Web becoming a "disinformation highway" (Floridi 1996), a favourite platform for propaganda, fake news and misinformation sharing (Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology 2017). Empirical research has shown that in particular social media "are the primary channel through which misinformation spreads online" (Allcott et al. 2019: 2) hence, the battle for establishing truth from falsehood needs to take place increasingly in the online realm. This paper argues that we ought to do this by attending to the specific interactions generated by the online environment.

Misinformation today is increasingly a phenomenon we experience *online*, yet we know so little about how the medium as such contributes to misinformation. Standard philosophical questions concerning misinformation investigate the truthfulness of statements (epistemic), or their harmful consequences (ethical and political implications). While these questions are important, the picture of online misinformation needs to be enriched by enlisting the conceptual panoply of media philosophy. Media philosophy starts from the observation that semantic content alone is not enough to understand what happens in communication, but also the media or channels through which the communication takes place play an important part. Marshall McLuhan famously stated that the "medium is the message" (1994) in a somewhat rhetorical move, bordering on media determinism (Friesen and Hug 2009). After McLuhan, media philosophers moved away from the extreme position of determinism, investigating more fruitful questions such as grasping the specific ways in which each medium shapes our understanding of communicated information. A central concept for media philosophy is that of mediality, usually understood as "the interaction of technology, society, and cultural factors through which institutionalized media of communication such as the press, television, or the World Wide Web produce, transform, and circulate symbols in everyday life" (Friesen and Hug 2009: 69). Mediality has been employed in different ways to illuminate diverse aspects of our technological lifeworld. In the following sections, I work with several insights from Vilém Flusser's philosophy to shed light on how the mediality of social media makes it a particularly friendly environment for misinformation.

ONLINE MISINFORMATION:
FALSE PROPOSITIONAL CONTENT AND UNCRITICAL ACTS OF SHARING

Without going into its multiple definitions, I take misinformation[2] to be any kind of information that leads to false beliefs (Fallis 2014). The standard approach to describing online misinformation has been to focus on its informational con-

tent—what I call a content-focused approach. However, this approach does not allow to significantly distinguish between the online and the offline versions of misinformation; after all, a false statement is false, online or offline just the same. Nevertheless, if we look at how information is effectively presented to us through communication channels, we will notice that online and offline misinformation asks us to perform differently as receivers. An offline piece of misinformation found on a paper leaflet or in a print tabloid (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018) affords us certain actions such as talking about it with our acquaintances ("Have you read the latest gossip in the Sun?") or giving the paper to someone else ("You have got to read this article, here, take it!"). These may be acts of endorsing or of debunking but since they take place locally, in our close network of acquaintances, nobody has any idea of how much misinformation is running around out there in the offline world. By contrast, online there are metrics for how often a misleading news item is shared and clicked on. Because of this measurability inherent to the online environment, it will seem that the online misinformation is running rampant more than the ear-to-ear misinformation, but this may not be the case. Meanwhile, the acts afforded by online misinformation are different because of the technical medium: we can click on the news item, share it publicly in our social media network, share it privately via a message, comment on it, save it, etc. All these acts are not necessarily of endorsement, but they still manage to amplify the visibility of said misinformation. To a large extent, what we do online is done in public and what we engage with becomes public.

To differentiate better the offline from online information, I propose to move away from the currently dominant content-focused approach which sees both online and offline information as primarily false propositional content. A more sophisticated understanding of online misinformation should also account for the effect of the technical medium in which (mis)information propagates. The content-focused framing is visible in the measures taken thus far to tackle misinformation on social media through automated and human-curated fact checking. There are curated databases of known disinformation against which the user's posts are automatically checked and then, depending on the social media platform, the user gets a warning "hoax alert" or the post is sometimes deleted (Ireton and Posetti 2018: 9). While these counter-measures have their worth and can help fight off the waves of obvious misinformation, their exclusive focus on fact-checking tends to paint a one-sided picture of the story by diverting our attention from the medium in which misinformation propagates. Furthermore, not all misinformation is factually false; rather, a lot of misinformation stories are made up of half-truths, statements out of context, or biased interpretations of facts (Fallis 2016: 338). I have argued elsewhere (Marin 2020) that there is a strong normative context associated with misinformation on social media which makes it that, pragmatically, descriptive sentences are deployed only if they enforce evaluative or prescriptive

statements which are the core of the misinforming piece. Misinformation is shared many times because the users want it to be true. Fact-checking and debunking of the descriptive parts of the misinformation does not extinguish the desire for the normative parts to be true, nevertheless. Thus, instead of focusing on the semantic content of misinformation, I propose to look at what makes online misinformation distinctive: the user's acts of sharing, posting and commenting while having limited or biased knowledge about what they are saying, effectively propagating their ignorance (Arfini, Bertolotti, and Magnani 2018). These acts of uncritical sharing are what makes misinformation successful and visible on social media. With some exceptions coming from social epistemology (Rini 2017; Sullivan 2019), the acts of sharing online have not received much philosophical attention. I think that precisely these acts of sharing hold the potential for understanding how misinformation differs from other pieces of genuine information found online. We share both information and misinformation when online, but with misinformation we tend to do so in an uncritical manner, under the spell of mindlessness. What are users thinking when they are sharing and endorsing misinformation items in their social networks? To this, a Flusserian inspired answer would be "probably nothing." That nothingness deserves further scrutiny.

MODES OF CONSCIOUSNESS
AND THE TECHNICAL MEDIATION OF THINKING

Vilém Flusser was a media and technology philosopher, deemed to be a "European McLuhan" (van der Meulen 2010: 186) not nearly as well-known as contemporary big names in media philosophy such as Marshall McLuhan himself or Jean Baudrillard (Mark Poster in Flusser 2011a: xi). Having died in 1991, Flusser never got to write about the Internet, but the framework he developed in relation to computer games and digital artifacts can be extended to the online lifeworld. One of Flusser's major contributions to media philosophy was to posit that codes structured and gave rise to different modes of consciousness throughout humanity's history. His term, *Bewusstsein* has been translated as "consciousness" in English but could have been translated equally as "awareness," as it designates a way in which we perceive the world pre-reflectively. Flusser identified three modes of consciousness which have historically dominated human communication, each caused by the cultural predominance of a different code: imagination (*Imagination/Vorstellungskraft*), conceptualisation or linear thinking (*historischen Bewusstsein*), and second-degree imagination or technical imagination (*Einbildung(skraft)*) (Marburger 2015: 228). A code is defined as "a system of signs ordered by rules" (Flusser 1984: 60). Examples of codes are language itself, (alphabetic) writing, paintings, and digital images. Codes are distinct ways of packaging information so one can transmit it to other humans,

i.e. communicate (Flusser 2002: 36–37). Codes are related to the materiality of the media, and, at the same time, can be described entirely formally, through their rules. Codes are ways of abstracting features of experience from the world to make the experiences thinkable and intersubjectively shareable (Flusser 2015). We do not need codes to make sense of our own experiences, but we need codes to engage in any form of sharing of these experiences, i.e. to communicate. The code in which our culture predominantly communicates shapes our default mode of consciousness and orientates us to grasp in a particular manner the messages of others. Flusser understood consciousness in a phenomenological vein, as "consciousness of something, toward which that consciousness is directed, or 'attuned'" (Nancy Ann-Roth, note in Flusser 2014: 177–78). The modes of consciousness are thus the pre-reflective background of our minds, like a constant melody running in our heads, and on top of them we start to build conscious reflections. This already raises a problem linked to misinformation sharing since some modes of consciousness favour critical engagement while others are more prone to lead us towards an uncritical faith-like acceptance of messages.

If misinformation flourishes when online users engage uncritically with information, we need to start with what makes critical engagement possible at all. Flusser would say that critical engagement with information is based on a specific form of consciousness promoted solely by linear codes such as alphabetic writing (Flusser 2011b: 95).[3] Just like writing's structure, this mode of consciousness follows a linear pattern: from cause to effect, from past to present. Flusser used interchangeably "linear," "critical" and "historical" (Flusser 2011b) to designate the same mode of consciousness which is typifying, iconoclastic, and linear-causal, characterised by its pattern of organising phenomena into classes or types (Flusser 2011a: 48). Scientific modes of inquiry and their associated critical attitudes could not have risen outside this linear mode of consciousness which became predominant with mass schooling and the invention of the printing press (Flusser 2013). But it does not mean that everyone inhabiting a culture of the text is a critical thinker by default. Rather, the dominant mode of consciousness of a textual culture orientates us to experience the world in a sequential manner, setting us up for an easier critical and reflective engagement with what we read. Even though the modes of consciousness are pre-reflective, as stated before, one could work against the mode promoted by the media one encounters by making a deliberate effort, for example reading a painting critically—by analysing its features one by one—but the medium of painting resists by default such mode of reading. Note that while the three modes of consciousness are imposed by the media dominating a culture at that time, one still needs to be trained to work with these media through education. That is, someone who is illiterate yet lives in a text dominated culture is unlikely to experience linear consciousness, and instead will rely on a magical consciousness when confronted with whatever seems like a message.

MAGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS UNCRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Currently, we live in a world of digital images which predispose us to engage with the information in an uncritical manner, giving rise to what Flusser has termed a "magical consciousness." Phenomenologically, it is experienced as a recognition of things as being connected—without any clear explanation of why—while also accepting this recognition as a given, as evidence itself.[4] There are two ways in which Flusser employs "magical": to qualify a mode of consciousness, and as a particular kind of behaviour performed while experiencing this mode of consciousness. Few philosophers have used the word "magical" without assuming the perspective of a scientific critique of superstition. To understand what "magic" consciousness is for Flusser, we need to dis-entangle magic from its anti-scientific connotations. The fundamental distinction magical/critical, according to Flusser, is not between the mythical and the factual, but in the patterns of engagement with the world and its mediatic representations: circular or linear temporality, and scenic or linear space. While "critical" designated a certain linear mode of engaging with information, magical consciousness is the opposite of critical engagement because it presupposes what Flusser calls a "scenic" structure of perceiving information while the time is experienced as being circular. Magical consciousness is experienced as a "belief in images" (Flusser 2002: 40), structurally similar with the experience of grasping an image: instantly, in a flash. When seeing an image, we understand its message and cannot afterwards un-see it. Images are hard to resist, they impose their meanings on their viewers who are trapped in one interpretation or, as Wittgenstein would have put it, "an image held us captive and we could not escape it" (Wittgenstein 1968). Wittgenstein was discussing mental images stirred by certain uses of language, yet the very choice of the image metaphor was meant to point to this impossibility of escaping what the images tell us.

Flusser explains how to identify a form of consciousness as magical by taking the behaviour as a proxy and trying to discern its temporal and spatial structures. Thus, in a magical consciousness, one experiences the world as "*scenic*: the eye hovers across the surface of the image, and produces relations that may be *reversed*" (Flusser 2002: 126–27). We look at a scene like we look at a painting, we can start from any point and end up anywhere, there is not a clear order of perceiving the scene. Magical behaviour is about acting and orienting oneself in the world based on sudden recognitions which impose themselves upon us with undeniable force. Similarly to how images disclose to us their message all of a sudden, magical consciousness is experienced as a full acceptance of something, as recognition. Of course we can be critical of a particular image—art critics and designers are usually critical of images—just as we can read a piece of text uncritically—when reading a religious prayer book, or reciting poems. But in these cases, we make a

deliberate effort to go against the patterns of engagement promoted by the code embedded in that medium and this effort is supported by the cultural and social rituals around works of art or religious books. However, if we were left alone with these texts and images, without any instilled habits of dealing with them, we would fall prey to the default modes of consciousness promoted by these media.

Flusser complicates matters even more by distinguishing two kinds of magical consciousness: classical and techno-magical, depending on the codes which dominate a culture, images and techno-images respectively. A techno-image is any image "produced by an apparatus" (Flusser 1984: 10) such as a photographic camera (be it on film or digital), a printer, a TV, a digital screen, a VR headset. Both types of magical consciousness are prescriptive, telling us what to believe or what to do: images make us see meanings, thus pointing at what we should believe, whereas techno-images command certain behaviours, hence have a distinctively performative effect. As example, the Christian icon is a classical image which imposes piety, respect, veneration in its viewers. Depending on their faith, people may also act upon seeing an icon, such as kneeling in front of it. Atheists will do no such thing, but the meaning of the icon is clear also for them—even if they may disagree with its message, they cannot un-see it. Another example: if we compare the painting of a fridge with the photograph of a fridge, these demand from us different actions and beliefs. The painting is experienced as a work of art, making us treat it in certain ways—reverence, disgust ("My 5-year-old could paint that!") or polite indifference—depending of the context. The photograph of the fridge tries to stir in us the desire to buy it or educating us about fridges—depending where we see it, in a flyer or in an encyclopaedia. Images and techno-images do not work their magic on us by themselves, they are embedded in social structures which demand a repertoire of actions from our side. We can, of course, consciously refuse to engage in these actions, but we know what we are asked to do.

The mark of the techno-magical consciousness is that it commands us to do things and that most often we do them without thinking about it. As Flusser put it, we become functionaries of an apparatus, unaware of why we do certain things, acting as if we were programmed (Farkas, Martinho, and Novaes 2017: 52). As their spectators, we experience techno-images as "commandingly outstretched index fingers, and we will blindly follow their instructions unless we realize that our blind following is exactly what they mean" (Flusser 2011b: 50–51). Techno-magical consciousness is a "programmed magic" (Flusser 1984: 14), an "abstract witchcraft" (Flusser 1984: 11–12) visible in the seductive effect of techno-images on our behaviour. Techno-magical behaviour shows itself in daily mundane acts such as clicking a like button, a share, but also in shopping, or cheering in front of the TV for our favourite sports team. One of the most evocative examples of magical behaviour caused by techno-images is the act of watching a football match on TV as described by Flusser. As the viewer watches the football game,

> [h]e succumbs to the spell nevertheless, for the program activates layers of his personality he had thought long since buried (e.g., patriotism and rowdiness). At first, he thinks he has caught his enthusiasm from the enthusiasm of the Brazilian players. Under critical analysis, however, he confirms that these players were enthusiastic because they knew he and those like him were watching them. They were not playing as a function of the match but as a function of the image's transmission. They were engaged not (or not primarily) in the game but in television images. The enthusiasm is therefore an aspect of the feedback loop between image and people: the images become more exciting the more excited the receivers are, and the receivers that much more excited the more exciting the images are. (Flusser 2011b: 55)

The football match is an event in which the main reason to play is because one is being watched on TV; this is a classic example of the functionary-apparatus complex (*Apparat-Operator Komplex*) in Flusser's work. A paradigmatic example of an apparatus was the photographic camera, claims Flusser: "the camera is the ancestor of all apparatus which now lay claim to making our existence automatic, everything from our external gestures to our internal thoughts, sentiments and desires" (Flusser 1984: 51). Apparatuses make us act as functionaries, short-circuiting our conscious decisions wherever possible. One could say that the football players perform because they have a contract, a salary, and possibly they even enjoy the game. But the reason why they are hired to play publicly is because another apparatus (the publicity system) tapped into the television apparatus: the player's revenues come from being seen on a screen. The football teams play a game as functionaries, they give rise to techno-images (snapshots, video-clips) which will be played and re-played by talk-show hosts and fans, while the game will become just this series of images. Similarly, most of us smile when someone takes a picture of us. We do it not because we suddenly enjoy the moment and it makes us smile, rather we become functionaries of the photographic apparatus which commands us to smile. Smiling when photographed, shopping, watching a movie are examples of culturally instilled automatic habits which rely on techno-images to be triggered.

Apparatuses use techno-images as means to program receivers into certain behaviours without telling them directly what to believe. Techno-images change actions, not beliefs—this is their magical effect achieved by immersion in what Flusser had called a photographic universe, a world shaped by techno-images in which we currently live. In this universe, unknowingly, we behave as functionaries or automatons seen from an aesthetic perspective:

> Even now we can observe these automaton gestures: at bank counters, in offices and factories, in supermarkets, in sports, in forms of dancing. However, we can also observe the same staccato structure in thought processes, when

we look closely enough: in scientific texts, in poetry, in musical composition, in architecture, in political policies. (Flusser 1984: 51)

This approach entails re-framing entirely the problem of online misinformation by turning it on its head: misinformation is not just the property of this or that false statement, but of the informational environment in which these statements flow, an environment saturated with techno-images and colonised by apparatuses. The techno-images are not something bad or brainwashing in themselves, nor are photographic cameras evil, but this digital structure of the online universe is very prone to being automated and used by different apparatuses. The universe of techno-images in which we currently communicate and live is not run by a single apparatus, rather there are multiple apparatuses which are connected to each other in an infinite chain, feeding each other: "We find further apparatus, such as industry, publicity, advertising, politics, economics, social structures, administrations, and so on. Each of these apparatus[es] . . . is cybernetically connected to all other apparatus. Each apparatus feeds on the program of a different apparatus" (Flusser 1984: 52).

Social media appears then as a playground for multiple apparatuses of advertising, politics and surveillance to turn their users into functionaries via techno-images. Misinformation propagation online is the effect of this informational environment saturated with and shaped by techno-images in which techno-magical consciousness is the dominant mode for its users. When acting in response to techno-images, we help sustain the constant feed-back loop between us and apparatuses that produce images. We are receivers in this set-up, feeding the apparatus with our reactions converted into data:

On the outside, [receivers] must act in accordance with the technical images they have received: buy soap, go on holiday, vote for a political party. . . . This feedback enables the images to change, to become better and better, and more like the receivers want them to be; that is, the images become more and more like the receivers want them to be so that the receivers can become more and more like the images want them to be. . . . The image shows a washing machine that it wants us to buy, and we want the image to show us the washing machine because we want to buy it. The image shows a political party for which it wants us to vote, and we want the image to show us the party because we want to vote for it. (Flusser 2011b: 55)

The claim that there is a flood of misinformation online relies on the multiple acts we do with misinformation as users. The standard metric for misinformation online is the user engagement: how many times a piece of misinformation is shared, liked and clicked on. This metric assumes that users will share only something they believe in, since sharing is usually interpreted as endorsing (Rini 2017) although some claim explicitly not to do this. In a Flusserian reading, however,

sharing is not endorsing, it means absolutely nothing, just the mark of an automatic reaction of posting stirred by apparatuses and mediated by techno-images. Thus, our micro-acts of sharing misinformation online would be explained as mindless actions performed under a techno-magical mode of consciousness into which we are programmed by a flood of digital images. When we are experiencing magical consciousness, the flow of information in front of our eyes does not allow for critical engagement. Critical and magical consciousness exclude each other. The question of why online users fall prey to misinformation transforms into asking what kind of media structures place users into a predominant mode of magical consciousness, thus subverting critical engagement.

The Magic of Techno-Images on Social Media

Social media presents some difficulties for the Flusserian framing relying on magical consciousness because, by this logic, print media littered with images should be also full of misinformation, which is not quite the case. Techno-images were already everywhere in the public space, long before the Internet, yet it was mostly social media that aggravated the phenomenon exponentially. Can the increase in the number of images circulating online explain, by itself, the recent explosion of misinformation? As I have presented it thus far, Flusser's media theory of the apparatus-functionary complex and the techno-magical consciousness is not enough to explain the qualitative difference between the information we receive via mass-media and the online information on social media. However, as I will show next, we can complement Flusser's perspective with some more recent insights from phenomenology of emotions to give a richer picture of what is going on when we share misinformation. The key is in explaining the different ways in which images function on social media by contrast to the offline world. There are three distinctive ways in which techno-images work to support the wave of online misinformation on social media: as evidence, as emotional set-up, and as a pre-selection filter. As I will show next, these three ways re-enforce each other in creating a cascade effect of automated sharing of misinformation online.

First, one is inclined to see online images as evidence for the claims made by a text attached to them. This mode resembles journalistic ways of using photographs along with news items. As readers consuming the news, we expect there will be pictures to illustrate every article—be it in print or on a website. This association of news items with photographs began in print media and continued when newspapers moved to the online world. Images appear in mainstream media even when a text would be enough. When a political event happens, the TV reporters transmit from the location, standing in front of a building with some political significance, to give more weight to their words. The background of the transmis-

sion may add nothing to the message, just as a picture of the White House does nothing to the article about the US presidency. Sometimes, however, the pictures do hold testimonial evidence which adds new information to the article. Online posts carrying misinformation can use pictures to mislead their readers because they assume that readers will default to the interpretation of pictures as evidence of an event. For example, in the wake of hurricane Sandy, some pictures showing sharks swimming in flooded streets went viral on Twitter—although the pictures were not from the actual hurricane site (Gupta, Lamba, Kumaraguru, and Joshi, 2013: 730). For misleading stories about vaccines or epidemics, the pictures attached are usually graphs which make the text easier to digest for those readers who anyway do not have the scientific literacy to interpret the main texts nor the graphs—yet the visuals help to make it seem more comprehensible. Thus, many pictures attached to misleading news act as evidence that something actually took place, be it an event in the world or a causal connection between two phenomena.

Second, there is also an emotional effect of images on social media. Most of the misinformation stories trafficked online are strongly emotional (Bakir and McStay 2018: 158), but this does not help us distinguish misinformation from genuine information. Rather, social media creates a medium where users are, most of the time, urged to feel something and to act based on these feelings. The highly emotional nature of discourse on social media is promoted and maintained by the overwhelming presence of techno-images everywhere, be those full-sized images or small emoticons all over the place—even replacing text-reactions which would have required comments.[5] The images that accompany misinformation, however, work more subtly than emoticons. To illustrate an article about the supposed harms of vaccines, the authors may choose a picture with a crying baby or with some strange skin rash. As readers, we are supposed to feel sympathy for the crying baby or fear of getting the rash. To illustrate an article about the well-being effects of the latest diet, the authors will show a picture of a smiling woman, looking fit and happy. As readers, we are supposed to envy her life and, depending on the readership's gender, strive to be more like her. Emotions "constitute reactions to objects and events which are significant to us" (Brady 2009: 422) and thus prepare us to act on those significant issues. One important difference between emotions stirred by offline situations versus the online situations is that, in offline contexts, we have the immediate possibility to act. In offline situations, what stirs our emotions is either close to us or concerns us directly—someone addresses us or speaks in our proximity. In online situations, there is not much we can do: we see pictures posted by others, we read texts written for no one in particular, we get struck by loads of information unrelated to us but that constantly command us to feel something. Our feelings online are usually disconnected from the possibility of meaningful action. Online, our options for action are reduced to small gestures confined to the online world: to like, comment, share, sign a petition, or report a message.

These online gestures constitute a very limited repertoire of actions compared to the diversity of emotions we may feel online. When we share misinformation, we react to a need to do something because we felt an emotion, but our sharing is not necessarily an endorsement, but rather something to quench the sudden desire to act. In this interpretation, images attached to misinformation work by manipulating our emotions, stirring in us the desire to react, while the online medium completes the arc of desire by giving us very few options of action. We have no choice but to share.

Third, online images have a specific effect of pre-filtering what type of content users engage with. By contrast with print media, online users see the image before they click on the actual news item, as a kind of preview. The image seen before reading the text gives us an indication of the slant of the text. A pro-Trump article will show a presidential picture of him, in a posture emanating authority; an anti-Trump article will show him angry or looking strange. The pre-filtering effect appeared online due to a design choice made by mainstream news agencies, namely to use the "card" layout: the reader first sees the title of the news item overlapped on a picture, with a brief text below (Bhargava, Bishop, and Zuckerman 2020: 1). The card layout increased the number of readers engaging with the news, i.e. clicking and scrolling through that page. Empirical research has shown that news consumers select the news items they will click on and read based on the pictures shown in the preview. For mass-media stories posted online, pictures are "the main entry points to stories . . . [as] the content, size, placement and colour of photos draw readers into pages" (Smaele, Geenen, and Cock 2017). This could be explained because most of us tend to take pictures as inherently credible (Kelly and Nace 1994; Newman et al. 2012). Newman and colleagues have shown that pictures help make a news item more believable, no matter what the picture showed. They call this "truthiness," following the comedian Stephen Colbert's definition of a "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (Newman et al. 2012: 969), something that seems true because it feels right. When users look for truthiness, then they will tend to engage with news items just because these confirm their pre-existing beliefs. This creates echo-chambers where misinformation runs rampant because it is unchallenged. The pre-filtering effect created by images helps us avoid engaging with news items that we might disagree with and it works in both ways: it helps conspiracy theorists not click on scientific news, and it helps science fans filter out fabricated news because they may not want to engage with disturbing junk news.

The distinctive difference between print mass-media and online social networks lies in how these three ways in which images function on social media re-enforce each other and contribute to the creation of a misinforming environment in which we are urged to act, not allowed to, yet constantly called on to feel something. This is where the misinformation sharing begins: in the space of non-thinking where we must act.

The Apparatuses of Social Media:
Beyond Ideology There Is Nothing but Pure Magic

As users, we are too well accustomed to seeing images illustrate any point, news item, or claim, that we do not even notice how manipulating this constant visual hum is for our brains. The proliferation of misinformation is the consequence of littering the online environment with images for every piece of information, a trend started by mainstream journalists. Of course, there are many pieces of textual misinformation—as seen by the viral tweets of anti-vaxxers—which do not need to rely on images for being shared. Reacting to a tweet, albeit a piece of text, does not allow for the linear consciousness to kick in since the text is too short and it is already emotionally charged. The texts in which misinformation appears on social media are loaded with emotions, even when no images appear alongside. When we read such misinforming texts, we recognise their truth as "truthiness," just as we recognise the message of an image. This ties in with the earlier point that one can read a text in an uncritical manner, under a magical mode of consciousness, if one has not developed the cognitive habits of reflecting on the text and going back and forth on it. In a culture dominated by techno-images, such cognitive habits are hard to acquire from the beginning, since these go against the dominant media shaping that culture.

Social media is an informational ecosystem where we act as functionaries of different apparatuses, performing mindless acts of reacting. When we are operating under the techno-magical consciousness, we do not think, we just react within the limited repertoire of online actions of sharing, liking, posting, or commenting. In this ecosystem, technical images function as the fuel that powers everything by enabling a magical mode of consciousness that inhibits critical engagement. Even genuine pieces of information that we share under the spell of techno-images are toxic since our receivers will not be in a critical state of mind to engage seriously with the information we are posting. When we share a long and well-written article from the New York Times on our news feed, we are signalling something to our network, but the signal is unclear: it may be that we genuinely care about the content and think it is important, or we are just showing off that we are the kind of person who reads such long pieces. After all, most articles are not read past the first paragraph by the users sharing them (Manjoo 2013). Sharing the NYT article could be an act performed under techno-magical consciousness, under the same unawareness as sharing misinformation. This is to say that it is possible, in principle, to share misinformation with a critical intent—for example to stir a debate—just as it is possible to share thoughtful pieces mindlessly, under a magical consciousness. The act of sharing by itself, when left uncommented, is a functionary-like act, a knee-jerk reaction, therefore a Flusserian interpretation would be to assume it is usually mindless. Misinformation propagates online because we are all too

comfortable with sharing without reflecting carefully, regardless of what we share in the first place.

This narrative of how images work on social media might indicate that there is some manipulation at stake and that users are just puppets in the tech giant's hands, to be sold for advertising revenue. The user as the product to be sold has been an increasingly popular angle in social media critique (Zuboff 2019) and these kinds of explanations make sense to us. The Flusser re-framing, however, is more puzzling. Flusser's point goes beyond explaining phenomena through manipulation, as he took great lengths to distance himself from any ideology critique and from the Frankfurt School (Flusser 1984: 46). The idea emphasised was that the entire process is automatic, and that no great wizard is running it. Those feeding us with images—be they journalists, TV show producers, social media influencers—do not consciously intend to mislead us. They give us the images we want to see, and the images make us choose to come back on social media. The emitters of techno-images online are just as much functionaries as we are as the consumers of their images. We are all engaged with apparatuses of streaming images, back and forth between us, all cooperating in maintaining a mode of magical consciousness on social media. We are all functionaries in nested apparatuses which use their techno-images to program us into automatic behaviours. This is not to say that there is no fault or responsibility, just that the overall effect is systemic and harder to pinpoint than, for instance, several Russian agencies unleashing fake news into the pristine newsfeeds. Misinformation appears as symptom of a wider problem with the entire ecosystem of online information on social media, and with our expectations from it. Social media platforms and news sites have at least this in common: they are constant sources of novelty. We are fed newness under the implicit assumption that new things are happening all the time and that we need to know them. It seems that we might lose something if we are not up to date with all the new stuff going on in the world. However, this constant stream of information is redundant. As Flusser put it, we are accustomed to novelty a bit too much:

> It is change itself which has become habitual and redundant; and it is 'progress' itself which has become uninformative and ordinary. What would be extraordinary, informative, and adventurous in our situation would be a sudden stagnation: every morning the same newspaper on the breakfast table, and every month the same poster in the shop window. This is what would shock us and surprise us. The photographs which replace each other steadily and according to program are redundant, precisely because they are always new ones. (Flusser 1984: 47)

This last point is about reframing repetition and seeking it on purpose. It is almost a Kierkegaardian point: by embracing repetition we allow ourselves to genuinely feel our experiences. A shift in our worldview is needed: to not expect novelty

and not to seek it anymore, is a way of liberating ourselves from the status of functionaries of apparatuses online.

The question of responsibility for this situation is too broad to tackle it here. From a Flusserian point of view, apparatuses just emerge and optimise each other's functioning in an impersonal manner. Meanwhile, with online misinformation, we can point clearly to some initial sources of misleading news, paid to pollute our streams of information. Yet between the impersonal apparatuses and the individual disinformation agencies, there lies a vast ecosystem of online interactions and designed interfaces. A take-home point from the previous sections is that, as social media users, we are allowed to do very little. Our actions are small and insignificant, emotionally unfulfilling. We are constrained by the interaction design to do very repetitive actions online, hence some weight of responsibility lies in the UX-designers who encourage our mindless browsing and quick reactions. On the other hand, we can also take ownership of our reactions up to a point and to try to go against the normal flow of interactions. One way would be to be inspired by Flusser's notion of dialogical engagement with information: this entails taking other users' broadcasted message and modifying it in some way. For Flusser, dialogical engagement leads to critical doubt due to its form alone (Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo 2011: 41). While dialogical engagement is difficult when watching television, with social media and Web 2.0 it becomes easier. Whenever we repost, retweet, share some other's posts, we are acting as nodes in a network, relays passing on a message that was never ours to begin with. However, if we took the time to read what we are sharing and then modify it in some meaningful way, for example by adding our own opinion to it and explaining our reasons for sharing it, it may significantly slow down our reactions. Any slowing down of actions opens a space for the critical engagement to kick in. This dialogic engagement however needs to be supplemented by finding new ways of commenting in a neutral manner, thus stripping social media of its constant emotional noise.

If we take seriously the idea that we have moral duties towards the informational environment (Floridi 2015), then perhaps our responsibility would be to avoid acting as automatic relays on social media. The apparatuses of social media do not care whether what we share is true, as long as we keep sharing and engaging. Misinformation propagation is the most visible effect of our constant immersion in these online environments which keep us stuck in techno-magical consciousness. From an aesthetic and experiential view, misinformation emerges at the encounter of our functionary-like behaviour with misleading information on social media and with interfaces allowing for poor, one-dimensional reactions. While it seems that on social media everyone is a broadcaster, uttering one's truth to the masses of friends, we are just nodes in networks relaying others' messages most of the time as a way of expressing ourselves.

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Notes

1. "Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others" (Carr and Hayes 2015: 50).
2. The term 'misinformation' originated in mass-media scholarship to designate the unintended broadcasting of misleading information, caused by a journalist's honest mistake or neglect, and thus distinguish it from disinformation which is intended by its emitter (think of propaganda-like news). Misinformation can be any false statement presented as a news item, but also out-of-context statements, truncated stories, and even parody not properly signalled (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018). I chose to focus on misinformation and not disinformation because whereas this distinction made sense in a journalistic context, it is de facto erased on social media. Most disinformation being shared on social media is disconnected from its original source, through many degrees of separation: a piece of disinformation carefully crafted by Russian trolls becomes misinformation after it has been shared by the first wave of social media users who did not know they were sharing falsities. After the first act of sharing, the intent may be lost yet the effect remains: to mislead users into holding false beliefs.
3. For Flusser, pictorial types of writing are distinct from the alphabetic kinds of writing; strictly speaking, only the latter are linear (Flusser 2011a).
4. One can be reminded of how alchemical signatures functioned in Early Modern philosophy, as signs: "There are no resemblances without signatures. The world of similarity can only be a world of signs" (Foucault 2002: 29).
5. The reactions on Facebook posts have names for emotions and feelings: like, sadness, love, caring for, laughter, amazement, anger. On Instagram and on Twitter, every like is heart-shaped, designating nothing less than love.

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