

“An incurable phenomenon of systematic, murderous and political violence”

How the manipulation of information restricts freedom of thought and judicial independence in post-fascist Italy



Foto : Markus Winkler, unsplash

Palermo, May 2024: It is nothing new in Italy - and not only here - that so-called fake news are used for political benefit. More subtle, however, is the use of real news being launched at moments when it suits the purpose. The event may have happened some time ago.

In 2018, Matteo Salvini, Italy's Interior Minister at that time, had created a system that controlled and analysed his social networks, i.e. the system examined which posts and tweets achieved the best results and what kind of people had interacted. This allows strategies to be changed through their own propaganda. For example, Salvini publishes a post on migration. It is then analysed to see which fear is expressed the most (by readers). If the majority of comments contain the fear that migrants could take away their jobs, Salvini's next post will fuel precisely this fear. This system is called 'The Beast' by the leaders¹.

He used this method for a long time, but then it quietened down a little in the media. Especially since the new right-wing government under Giorgia Meloni, you no longer wake up every day with a 'Nutella bread grin' from Salvini, who also liked to post something about his breakfast or his evening drink for his sympathisers on (then) Twitter (now X). This went well below the belt when people happened to watch Salvini casually chatting on the beach while the umpteenth shipwreck involving refugees was taking place.

Today, we have other forms of disinformation that could be even more serious.

¹ See further: [Die Bestie – die Propaganda-Software der italienischen Rechten](#), July 2018

Decontextualised circulation of information

Let's start with a remarkable accumulation of media news on social media channels and YouTube just two weeks before the European Parliament elections. There are currently numerous videos circulating about arrivals on Lampedusa, claiming that more than 7,000 people arrived on the island during the weekend. It is true that there was a weekend with such a high number of [arrivals in September 2023](#). What is false is that this has been repeated in recent days. These images are now being shared by AI technology generated pages on X (e.g. Europe Invasion) right before the EU elections without being contextualised and further shared by right-wing users to stir up racist resentment and create a hostile climate against migrants and refugees. This is just one example of how social media is being used more and more, especially to spread right-wing misinformation and expand the invasion narrative.

Silencing

Media has always been a big issue in Italy. The channels of media mogul and long-time Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who transformed television into a perpetual show in the 1990s, characterised above all by the absence of political discussions and sexist entertainment programmes, are unforgettable. Since Giorgia Meloni came to power, another change in the media landscape has become evident. This time it concerns state television RAI with its three programmes. These three have always been in different political hands: RAI 3 has always been considered a 'left-wing' broadcaster. But now the programme directors of all three channels have been replaced by people who are loyal to Meloni or at least right-wing thinkers; many centre-left journalists have left the broadcaster and now prefer to work for independent channels. There are still a few political programmes that have not bowed to this, but here too, more and more attempts are being made to keep them on a leash.



Foto: Pixabay

In April 2024, Antonio Scurati, an expert on Mussolini, wanted to give a short monologue on Italy's Liberation Day in the political programme "Chesarà". On 25 April, Italy's liberation from Nazi-fascism is celebrated and the partisans and the Italian resistance are commemorated. Scurati wanted to make a connection between Mussolini and today's fascism and was promptly disinvited by the programme management. The [TAZ](#) reported: "His text began with the assassination of the socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti by Duce henchmen in Rome in 1924, exactly 100 years ago, and he continued with the memory of the [massacre in march 1944](#), in which 335 civilians fell victim in Rome, carried out by the Nazis as revenge for a partisan attack that had cost the lives of 33 German soldiers. According to Scurati, from its early to late years, Mussolini's fascism was 'throughout its history an incurable phenomenon of systematic, murderous and political violence'." The presenter of the programme, Serena Bortone, was unaware of the disinvitation and published the monologue.

Paolo Corsini, the programme planner for RAI's political programmes, has often attracted attention as a Meloni supporter at public events. He justified the disinvitation by claiming that Scurati's fee was too high (1,800 euros). However, this restriction on the free expression of opinion on a topic that was unpopular with the government backfired; there was a huge media reaction from the non-right-wing media and the monologue quickly went viral on

social media. Giorgia Meloni had no choice but to move forward to take the wind out of the sails, but her explanation of the whole thing is weak: in her opinion, the left was hyping up the case and it was only about 1,800 euros too much pay. The Scurati case makes it clear where the journey is heading to.

Fake news to stabilise migration policy

At the end of May, the civilian sea rescue ship Humanity 1 by SOS Humanity rescued refugees from four boats. One baby lost its life during the journey. The Italian Ministry of the Interior assigned the Humanity 1 to the distant harbour of Livorno, a tactic designed to keep civilian rescue ships out of the rescue area for as long as possible. The Italian press agency ANSA reported that the deceased baby had been taken on board in the SAR (sea rescue) zone of Libya. Sergio Scandura, a journalist for Radio Radicale, wonders where this information comes from: "Since ANSA does not specify the source, and this is not the first time, we do not know whether the error is due to the person who wrote the news or - what would be much worse - to an institutional source from the Ministry of the Interior or the Coast Guard". This seems like a small thing, so why is it so important to get this news right? According to Scandura, the Ministry of the Interior does not want journalists to know exactly what is happening at sea. Claiming that the rescue took place in an area under Libyan responsibility discredits the civilian sea rescue ships on the one hand - they should not go there. Reporting on a dead child and openly stating that two of these boats departed from Tunisia, the country with which Italy has concluded several bilateral agreements, is also



Foto: rawpixel.com, Freepik

politically inconvenient. "The model of agreements between Italy and the EU Commission (...) has the same criminal connotations as the memorandum concluded with the 'clans' that rule Libya. Perhaps those responsible for these agreements are embarrassed to report and document the fact that as well from Tunisia refugees are completely desperate - including newborn babies dying of malnutrition.

Agreements that only serve to score electoral successes with the issue of migration," says Scandura. Considering the continuing persecution and imprisonment of refugees for months, who are then abandoned in the deserts of neighbouring Algeria and Libya, it is understandable that such reports are not pleasant for the government. We have to deal with fake news every day which are usually much more obvious. But the power to form opinions that favour the right-wing narrative also lies in the details. Caution is needed.

Attacks on the independence of the judiciary

We were able to observe a different kind of media attack, but also an attack on the independent judiciary, following a judgement by Iolanda Apostolico, a judge from Catania. She had not confirmed the detention of eight Tunisians in 2023 and they had to be released accordingly. The men had been detained in the new centre for fast-track proceedings in Pozzallo. Her technical justification was later shared by other judges: the 'border procedures'

were not compatible with the Italian constitution and were therefore not constitutional. In addition, they are also incompatible with EU law, as detention may only take place if it is based on a case-by-case assessment. What followed the decision resembled a witch hunt. Videos of Apostolico's participation in demonstrations of the 'extreme left', according to [Matteo Salvini](#), were uncovered and Apostolico's family was verbally attacked. "Attacks", says the online magazine [Open](#), "(...) with the obvious aim of intimidating any judge who makes an interpretation that is not to their liking or does not correspond to a certain political direction".

The National Association of Judges met at the end of October 2023 and adopted a document by a majority that dealt with the case of Iolanda Apostolico. The question of the independence of the judiciary and the massive attacks on judges and lawyers were a cause for concern. The letter calls on "politicians to reflect on the impact of similar delegitimation measures aimed at weakening the credibility and independence of the judiciary. In the document, the professional organisation calls on the Data Protection Commissioner to take all appropriate initiatives to protect judges and prosecutors who are exposed to unlawful intrusions into their private lives due to the content of their rulings," says [Open](#).



Foto: Tingey Injury Law Firm, unsplash

Attacks on the judiciary, which are particularly not only professionally justified, but also include a personal threat to the person and their environment, are familiar to us from the times of fascism, when many judges were deprived of their work permits, threatened or sent into exile. We have to start asking ourselves how far away we actually are from those times.

Judith Gleitze, *borderline-europe*, Sicily
Translation to english: Sandra Krause