What Difference Does the Digital Era Make to Authority and Power Structures? A Reply to Beatriz Buarque

William Gopal, University of Amsterdam, william.gopal@student.uva.nl; Federica Russo, University of Amsterdam, F.Russo@uva.nl

―――――――――――

Beatriz Buarque (2022) provides a very insightful analysis of how conspiracy theories spread in the digital era. She carries out a thorough analysis of video that was distributed and circulated on social media, issuing the notorious conspiracy theorist David Icke connecting the COVID-19 pandemic to 5G technologies.

There is much to learn from the paper, in terms of theorizing about conspiracy theory and 'multimodal critical affect-discourse'—the specific methodology used to dissect the video in which Icke spread these ideas about 5G and COVID. We take on this opportunity to build a bridge between the social epistemology of conspiracy theories and social media analysis on the one hand, and philosophy information (PI) on the other hand.

Authority in the Digital Era

The analysis of Buarque, in fact, sheds light on how and why digital media "facilitated the production, consumption, and distribution of conspiracy theories as 'truth'" (2022, 318), and she does so from the specific angle of social epistemology and social media analysis. There is however another aspect of this 'how and why' that we wish to highlight, and this has to do with an analysis of the same phenomenon from a more distinct 'PI' perspective. A key element in Buarque's analysis is a substantial change in how 'authority' is recognized: in the digital era, and specifically in the context of social media, *visibility* is what lends support to authority, and this is motivated by affective engagement in the digital space. But how does this shift become possible? We can mobilize here analysis of the digital sphere that has its roots in PI (Consalvo and Ess 2011; Floridi 2016; 2015).

To begin with, there is a question related to the speed at which news can be posted and shared on social media. Information technologies (ITs) have led to a distinct shift in the procedures of producing and sharing digital informational objects due to their ontological properties (Floridi 2016, 50). Such objects are 'typified' and 'cloneable'; the former referring to the idea that tokens of (digital) objects are just as valuable as the type they instantiate. Our unaltered copy of the mp4 file (token) of the original Icke video (type) is just as good as yours. Likewise, it is easily 'cloneable'; that is, the tokens of digital objects are broadly interchangeable and, given the supporting technological infrastructure, are easily reproduced at a negligible cost. As such, these ontological qualities contribute to the ease and speed at which (fake) news can be generated, posted, and shared on social media. Speed is however the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understand the transformation brought about digital technologies and social media for the matter. We wish to draw attention to three aspects in this context, without pretention to exhaust the analysis.

First, in a moment in which the society at large was facing restrictions in their social activities due to lockdown measures, the Internet and social media have been at the same time windows to keep inter-personal communication going *and* very powerful and potentially dangerous echo-chambers. It is important not to demonize digital technologies here, because if there is clearly a responsibility in their way of working that explains how and why conspiracy theories spread, they *also* have been the lifeboat of our social lives. Digital technologies are rightly criticized for their contentious links with new forms of capitalism

that perpetuates power structures and social inequalities (Cohen 2019; Srnicek 2017; Wark 2019; Zuboff 2019). However, as aforementioned, the positives of digital technologies are not to be understated. The digital technologies that Buarque draws attention to in facilitating the transmission of Icke's video were also used in the organization and implementation of mutual aid groups during the initial months of lockdown in the UK (Ntontis et al. 2022); thus, not only providing an avenue for maintaining inter-personal communication but also the infrastructure required for communal care. Of course, even the positives of digital technologies do not come for free, and there is a steep learning curve to re-adapt our lives from mainly 'offline' to fundamentally 'onlife', i.e. that inherent hybrid online and offline space in which we live nowadays (Floridi 2015).

Second, there is an element related to the *kind* of interactions that we human agents entertain with digital technologies that literally exploded or grew exponentially. PI is again of help here, because being onlife and the new forms interactions among human and artificial agents are a hallmark of the digital revolution, and all the more so since smart devices accompany any moment of our daily routine. These interactions have been beneficial, insofar as they allowed us to get information from multiple sources in no time, or insofar as they allowed researchers from across the Globe to collaborate in unprecedented ways, as it has happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. But, as shown in Buarque's contribution, they have also been dangerous and harm spreading, as the case of the 5G conspiracy shows.

Third, Buarque rightly raises questions about authority. She convincingly shows that videos such as David Icke's receive so much recognition and echo, because authority is not anymore linked to one's expertise and/or role in relevant institutionalized contexts, but is rather related to 'volatile' parameters (such as 'likes') dictated by the (commercial) logic of social media. In the following, we will present briefly the idea of poiêsis, and especially of poietic responsibility, which we think is closely related to that of poietic authority.

Poietic Authority

Applied to Buarque's analysis of the conferring of alleged authority on David Icke's video interview, the concept of poiêsis can aid us in thinking further about the role that digital technologies play in facilitating new modes of the production of semantic artefacts and their consequences. As Buarque (2022, 319) notes, digital technologies have allowed 'ordinary individuals' to manipulate and emulate "specific editing techniques, visual features, and particular ways of addressing the audience [which] are almost instantly associated with journalists privileged status as interpreter of the social world". That is, ordinary individuals are now able to emulate and produce certain stylistic features of semantic artefacts that were previously available only to authoritative institutions. From the lens of PI, we can read the kind of authority that belongs to these institutions to be one of *poietic* authority. This is the idea that because a semantic artefact, x, is produced by a specific actor which occupies a certain social role and has a large degree of trustworthiness or social authority, then x is taken to be reliable and trustworthy. That a semantic artefact is produced by a specific poietic authority might be identified by various formal features. Indeed, this chimes well with Buarque's methodology, in which she notes that authority is 'visually and textually constructed'. Given that digital technologies have allowed for individuals to produce semantic artefacts with these formal visual and textual features, it is plausible to suggest that digital technologies have contributed to the flattening of poietic authority. To take an

approach informed by PI to Buarque's analysis aids in further understanding how the creative practices associated with Icke's video confer authority and legitimation on the video.

This leads us to present in some more detail the concept of poiêsis, and specifically of poietic responsibility.

Digital technologies have endowed us with greater powers of poiêsis (Floridi and Sanders 2005; Floridi 2011; 2016; Russo 2012; 2016; 2022). Within PI, poiêsis is understood as an agent's creative capacities which can be exercised over various domains. It can be exercised over the self, in the form of cultivating an online identity or cultivating moral virtues (*ego* poiêsis); over the social world, by organizing for social change or establishing a mutual-aid group (*socio*poiêsis); and over a natural or artificial environment (*eco*poiêsis), think here of building a dam or altering the informational environment (infosphere) by producing a conspiracy theory. Poiêsis also refers to the production of semantic artefacts which encapsulate information. For example, in crafting a Tweet, letter, or video, which encapsulates semantic information, one is also engaged in an act of poiêsis. That digital technologies have endowed us with a greater capacity for poiesis is well exemplified by the case of spreading of conspiracy theories discussed by Buarque.

Poietic Responsibilities

Building upon this, we introduce the notion of poietic responsibilities. In sum, poietic responsibilities are a distinct class of responsibilities that an agent possesses in virtue of their poietic capacities. These remain in contradistinction to responsibilities such as the (excusable) epistemic obligation to seek out additional evidence when presented with a controversial claim (Millar 2019, 531), the suggestion that social media companies possess regulatory responsibilities in virtue of facilitating democratic epistemic participation (Smith and Niker 2021), or that producing misinformation violates a responsibility to not lie. Rather, poietic responsibilities provide agents guidance to ensure that acts of poiêsis minimize entropy in the infosphere. This is the idea that the reduction of the overall informational content of the infosphere by either corrupting or destroying informational entities, inflicts a harm upon the infosphere (Floridi 2013, 67). From the perspective of PI, the production, dissemination, and sharing of conspiracy theories, and more broadly misinformation, is to engender entropy within the infosphere. That we possess poietic responsibilities is rooted in *how* digital technologies have provided us with an increase in poietic powers; that is, acts of poiesis are situated within a co-productive relationship with technologies (Russo 2022). Such partnership endows *us*, humans, with a 'responsibility that is at once epistemic and moral' (Russo 2022, chapter 9). We suggest that this responsibility is *poietic* responsibility.

The poietic responsibilities salient for our response to Buarque are that of *artefactual autonomy* and of *future use*. The responsibility of future use refers to an agent's responsibility to anticipate the future use of the result of poiêsis and a willingness to intervene if the use of a semantic artefact could engender entropy within the infosphere. Think, for example, of the publication of a controversial scientific report; the authors are aware that its findings might be easily misinterpreted and used to "justify" a conspiracy theory. As such, they issue an

addendum to clear up any possible ambiguities one may find. Briefly, the responsibility of artefactual autonomy is as follows. If an act of poiesis results in the production of an artificial agent, such as a web-bot or a content suggestion algorithm, then its producer ought to limit the artificial agent's autonomy to ensure that it does not cause entropy within the infosphere. How do the poietic responsibilities of artefactual autonomy and future use aid us in thinking about the role of social media in allowing individuals to share contents, and *when* action is needed?

First, we contend that social media companies possess poietic responsibilities; this, of course, is built on the assumption, and work in social ontology that groups can be reasonably ascribed moral and epistemic responsibilities (List and Pettit 2011; Collins 2019). Building on this, we also suggest that in virtue of occupying a position of social authority, and a curatorial role in selecting content to show users, social media companies incur additional responsibilities toward users and the infosphere. Second, that social media sites, and the designers thereof, possess a double poietic power, not only in exercising their own acts of poiêsis when constructing digital environments but also in guiding other agents' poietic actions. As designers of 'poietically enabling environments' (Floridi 2013, 161), social media companies *guide* users' poietic practices. Think here of Twitter's 280-character limit; users have their poietic capacities constrained by the design of this environment which in turn has an influence upon the semantic artefacts produced. In this case, there is little room for nuance and contextualization. We believe that the possession of this double power implies that social media sites possess a high degree of poietic responsibility.

That social media sites regularly shirk their poietic responsibilities is intertwined with the other dimensions of power we drew attention to at the beginning of this reply. That the design of digital environments *rewards* certain modes of poietic activity is linked to the logic of surveillance capitalism is made apparent in the *automated* distribution of false semantic artefacts. Content recommendation algorithms on YouTube, which are honed using users' personal data, regularly push extreme, false, and misleading content to users (Giansiracusa 2021), even *after* the supposed "tightening-up" of content moderation in light of COVID-19 (McCrosky et al. 2021). Note that these practices neglect social media companies' responsibility of artefactual autonomy; artificial agents are proactively designed in a way which engenders entropy in the infosphere. Moreover, despite the Icke video being unique insofar as it "triggered an unprecedented joint effort on the part of media companies to deplatform an individual" (Buarque 2022, 317), the persistence of effective misinformation online suggests that the responsibility of future use remains unfulfilled (McCrosky et al. 2021). This is not to say that attempts to fulfil the responsibility of future use do not exist.

Think here of Twitter's introduction of a "misinformation banner" flagging content as misleading (Akewushola 2022), YouTube's practice of linking to information about COVID-19 from the World Health Organization, or *The Guardian* signposting the age of articles. What is clear, however, is that social media companies are incentivised to flout their poietic responsibilities due to the economic logic of surveillance capitalism—the greater the time spent on a platform = greater clicks = greater profit; therefore, the content recommended will be done so to increase the probability of users remaining on that platform regardless of whether it engenders entropy in the infosphere.

Moreover, certain features of semantic artefacts which aid in capturing users' attention will be privileged in virtue of the design of digital environments. That is, the design of digital environments guides producers of semantic artefacts acts of poiêsis in a way which aligns with this economic logic. Think here of the psychological levers pulled by clickbait titles riffing on variations of "You'll NEVER GUESS What They Don't Want You to Know About COVID-19", "The TRUTH About *xyz* EXPOSED" or a content creator's decision to keep a video relatively short to ensure a users' attention is not redirected. Moreover, the insight provided by Buarque that visibility equals legitimacy, raises the question of the role of the *intentional* design of social media sites aids in the process of legitimizing conspiracy theories and, more broadly, pieces of mis and disinformation.

How are Digital Messages Spread?

As we said, there is much to learn from Buarque's analysis, and we clearly need to complement analyses of the spreading of conspiracy theories in the digital era from the perspective of social epistemology and media studies, with perspectives from the philosophy of information. Once we hold a better grip on how such messages spread, and how they affect the perception and understanding of the public, what should we do? With great (poietic) possibilities also come great (poietic) *responsibilities*, and we need to educate, especially the younger generation, to a sensible use and consumption of social media products. *At the same time*, we need to think deeply about the role of social media in allowing individuals to share contents, and *when* action is needed, and what the role of institutions and governments in these context ought to be.

References

Akewushola, Nurudeen. 2022. 'Twitter to Flag Tweets That Contain Misinformation during Crisis'. *FactCheckHub (Blog)* 26 May 2022. https://factcheckhub.com/twitter-to-flag-tweets-that-contain-misinformation-during-crisis/.

Buarque, Beatriz. 2022. "Is It Conspiracy or "Truth"? Examining the Legitimation of the 5G Conspiracy Theory during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Social Epistemology* 36 (3): 317–28.

Cohen, Julie E. 2019. *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Collins, Stephanie. 2019. *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. First edition. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Consalvo, Mia, and Charles Ess, eds. 2011. *The Handbook of Internet Studies*. Handbook of Internet Studies. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Floridi, Luciano. 2016. *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Floridi, Luciano. ed. 2015. *The Onlife Manifesto. Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*. Springer.

Floridi, Luciano. 2013. *The Ethics of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Floridi, Luciano. 2011. *The Philosophy of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Floridi, Luciano and Jeff Sanders. 2005. "Internet Ethics: The Constructionist Values of Homo Poieticus." In *The Impact of the Internet on Our Moral Lives* edited by Robert J. Cavalier, 195–214. New York: SUNY Press.

Giansiracusa, Noah. 2021. *How Algorithms Create and Prevent Fake News: Exploring the Impacts of Social Media, Deepfakes, GPT-3, and More*. Berkeley, CA: Apress.

List, Christian, and Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McCrosky, Jesse, Brandi Geurkink, Kevin Zawacki, Anna Jay, Carys Afoko, Maximillian Gahntz, Owen Bennett. 2021. "YouTube Regrets Report." *Mozilla Foundation*. https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/youtube/regrets/.

Millar, Boyd. 2019. "The Information Environment and Blameworthy Beliefs." *Social Epistemology* 33 (6): 525–37.

Ntontis, Evangelos, Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Guanlan Mao, Tom Dines, Jazmin Kane, Joshua Karakaya, Rotem Perach, et al. 2022. "Tracking the Nature and Trajectory of Social Support in Facebook Mutual Aid Groups during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 76 (June): 103043.

Russo, Federica. 2022. *Techno-Scientific Practices: An Informational Approach*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Russo, Federica. 2016. "On the Poietic Character of Technology." *HUMANA.MENTE Journal of Philosophical Studies* 9 (30): 147–74.

Russo, Federica. 2012. "The Homo Poieticus and the Bridge between Physis and Techne." In *Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Technology: Critical Reflections* edited by Hilmi Demir. Springer. http://www.humanamente.eu/index.php/HM/article/view/64.

Smith, Leonie and Fay Niker. 2021. "What Social Media Facilitates, Social Media Should Regulate: Duties in the New Public Sphere." *The Political Quarterly* 92 (4): 613–20.

Srnicek, Nick. 2017. *Platform Capitalism*. Theory Redux. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity.

Wark, McKenzie. 2019. *Capital Is Dead*. London ; New York: Verso.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. First edition. New York: PublicAffairs.