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**Securitization of social media
The security discourse of non-state actors around information
dissemination in social media.**

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List of Acronyms

COPRI	Copenhagen Peace Research Institute
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DA	Discourse Analysis
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UPI	User Profile Information
ST	Securitization Theory
PDT	Poststructuralist Discourse Theory

Abstract

In the last decade, the voices that demand the regulation of content on social media platforms have increased considerably, especially around that threat posed by disinformation, misinformation and fake news. This research uses a post-structuralist approach to securitization theory to analyse how disinformation has been understood as a threat. Specifically, the research looks into how non-state actors, such as: nongovernmental organizations, civil society institutions and academics have constituted a security discourse around content on social networks.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research is part of the requirements for obtaining the M.A. Development Studies (Social Justice Perspectives) at the Institute for Social Studies (ISS), a faculty at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The SJP programme provides a multi-disciplinary course that engages with fields such as human rights, gender and conflict studies. This research paper can be situated within the conflict studies realm, as it is based on the theoretical developments of security studies to analyse how social media content is conceived as a threat. In recent years social polarization has been identified as a growing problem, it has been linked to disinformation narratives that are spread through social media platforms. This research seeks to study how this problem is understood by non-state actors and what solutions are given to the issue.

Keywords

Social media, misinformation, securitization, and post-structuralism.

1 Introduction

The dissemination of false and misleading information through social media, principally by platforms like Facebook, Youtube or Twitter, has created a context in which public opinion can be formed and shaped not according to the debate of reasonable factual arguments, as it is expected to be within liberal democracy. This has caused several key actors, to call for the regulation of content on social media. In 2017 the rapporteurs for freedom of expression of the United Nations, the Organization of American States, of the the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), issued a joint statement in regard to Fake news, disinformation and propaganda. In such declaration they expressed their “concern that disinformation and propaganda [...] interfere with the public’s right to know and the right of individuals to seek and receive, as well as to impart, information and ideas [...] (and can) harm individual reputations and privacy, or incite to violence, discrimination or hostility against identifiable groups in society” (OEA 2017).

Different stakeholders, such as: governments, academics, NGO`s and top tech companies, started to publicly refer to disinformation as a threat to political and social stability. International governmental human rights organizations issued statements on the threat posed by disinformation through social media (OEA 2017); social media companies have issues human rights policies to deal with the issue (Facebook 2021); universities, journalist, media institutions and civil society organizations created platforms and projects to identify and tackle fake news, as well as to fact check information in social media (Erasmus+ 2019; EU DisinfoLab 2020; Funke and Flamini 2018; Posetti and Matthews 2018). This research looks into how non-state actors, specifically nongovernmental organizations (NGO`s), civil society, and academics have understood and framed the issue of regulating content in social media.

1.1 Context background and Problem statement

Several books, academic papers, opinion posts, news articles and research studies that address the ‘fake news phenomena’ have started by pointing out how in 2016 the Oxford Dictionary selected “post-truth” as the word of the year (See: Al-Rodhan 2017; BBC 2016; Boler and Davis 2018; Flood 2016; McIntyre 2018; Zimdars and McLeod 2020). Few words could encapsulate better the events of that year. The election of Donald Trump in the US, and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, had shown a current trend in politics, one in which it was alleged that “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (BBC 2016).

The political events from 2016 waved a trend in politics around the world, that sedimented the use of words like post-truth, fake news, disinformation, and/or misinformation in public discussions. They tend to refer to the ways in which information was being disseminated thorough social media platforms. The issue of false information is not a new phenomenon (Floridi 1996; Winston and Winston 2021), yet in the last few years it has gained unprecedented relevance. Why has this issue gained prominence in public discussions? How is it treated? These questions motivated my curiosity on the subject.

A number of academic journals, specialized books, research reports, and journalistic articles try to explain the phenomenon from a great diversity of approaches. Though classifying all research and publications would require an entire new research project here I present some publications according to five general topics regarding misinformation, disinformation and fake news¹:

The consumption. These publications engage with issues such as the difficulty for users to spot fake news online, how is disinformation consumed and who are the targets of disinformation campaigns. (See: Bail et al. 2018; Bakir and McStay 2018; Brady et al. 2017; Lvinger 2018; Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016; van der Linden 2017; Wineburg et al. 2016).

The distribution and production. These texts engage with issues such as: the role and responsibility of social media platforms; the role of journalism and media outlets; the economic incentives for producing and distributing information; the role of interest groups in social media pages and profiles; the intentions of producing and disseminating false information. (See: Howard 2020; Medzini 2021; O’Callaghan et al. 2015; Törnberg 2018; Vaidhyanathan 2018; Wu 2017; Young 2021).

The effects. These publications engage with issues that mostly address how the public sphere is affected by misinformation and fake news, with topics such as: the effect of misinformation, disinformation and fake news in journalism, in democracy, and in mass media. (See: Cadwalladr 2017; Madrigal 2017; Marchal et al. 2018, 2018; McIntyre 2018; McNair 2018; Newman 2019; Schiffrin 2017; Zimdars and McLeod 2020).

Typologies. Publications that try to classify, define and/or create typologies of misinformation, disinformation and fake news. These publications, make a distinction of fake news, misinformation and disinformation, based on intent, sources and effects. (See: Althuis and Haiden 2018; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Gelfert 2018; Kapantai et al. 2021; Molina et al. 2021; Volokh 1996; Winston and Winston 2021; XINYI ZHOU and ZAFARANI 2020).

Remedies. Publications that identify a problem with fake news and disinformation and seek to present solutions or analyze how solutions have been developed. This includes human and technological developments for fact-checking initiatives by academic institutions, NGO’s, and media outlets, and analysis on companies and states policies and regulations of misinformation. (See: A. Ceron and Carrara 2021; Chekeando n.d.; Erasmus+ 2019; Full Fact n.d.; International Fact-Checking Network n.d.; Knight Foundation 2019; Kumar et al. 2020; Solon 2017; Truly 2014; Zhou et al. 2020; Zimdars and McLeod 2020).

These publications make a conceptual distinction between disinformation and misinformation. The former being information intentionally produced and disseminated to influence and affect public opinion, the latter refers to information that is shared unknowingly by users. And although they approach the subject in different ways, they all share a common understanding of the problem between defining what ought to be considered truth and what a lie or

¹ These categories are not intended to be comprehensive and in some cases the texts address the issue from different points.

false information. The distinction between disinformation and misinformation, puts an emphasis on the intent of producing and distributing information, which underlines the predominant analytical questions within this literature, that is concerned with “the distinction between “truthful” and “false” information [...] of “fake” versus “true” news ” (Farkas and Schou 2018, 299).

However, there have been other researchers that have engaged with this phenomenon not from the ‘truthfulness’ *versus* ‘falsehood’ of information, but from a perspective that emphasizes the political struggle underling it (See: Eike 2020; Farkas and Schou 2018, 2019, 2020; Ördén 2020; Renner and Spencer 2018). This research follows those scholars whose approach centers around the conflicting “agents [that] struggle to define what counts as valid or deceitful [...] how different conceptions of “fake news” serve to produce and articulate political battlegrounds over social reality ” (Farkas and Schou 2018, 300).

Since the political events of the last decade different stakeholders, such as: governments, academics, NGO`s and top tech companies, started to publicly refer to disinformation as a threat to political and social stability. International governmental human rights organizations issued statements on the threat posed by disinformation through social media (OEA 2017); social media companies have issues human rights policies to deal with the issue (Facebook 2021); universities, journalist, media institutions and civil society organizations created platforms and projects to identify and tackle fake news, as well as to fact check information in social media (Erasmus+ 2019; EU DisinfoLab 2020; Funke and Flamini 2018; Posetti and Matthews 2018).

This research looks into how the discourse of fake news, misinformation and disinformation² in social media platforms has been articulated as a security issue, that is how has it been identified as a threat, a threat to what? to whom? What is being threatened? To address these questions these research takes as a starting point a post-structuralism reading of Securitization theory (ST), developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). The research analyzes the security discourse articulated of non-state actors around fake news, misinformation and disinformation in social media. The work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe provide the theoretical framework to do a post-structuralist reading of ST and serve us to analyze how chains of equivalence are articulated to construct disinformation and fake news in social media as a threat.

1.2 Paper structure

Chapter two starts with a review of the theoretical developments within the discipline of security studies that identified the basic notions regarding the traditional realist approach to security. It then follows to develop the key elements of securitization theory and a post-structuralist approach to security studies, as they set the bases for the final part of the chapter in which we develop a post-structuralist reading of ST. The third chapter outlines the objective and research questions guiding this research. The fourth chapter looks into two issues. The first is a review of the general narratives sounding social media and the information ecosystem it creates. The second focus on how social media functions and the role of

² In this research, the concepts disinformation, disinformation and fake news are used in an equivalent way, since we do not study the interest of the actors who enunciate them; but we focus on how they are used within political struggles.

algorithms. The fifth chapters comprise the analysis of the security discourse of the selected non-state actors. The final chapter offers the conclusions.

2 A post-structuralist reading of securitization theory

Security is the means by which extraordinary policies and measures are accepted or at minimum tolerated. As Buzan et al mention invoking security is key to legitimize the use of force “by saying “security,” a state representative declares an emergency condition, thus claiming a right to use whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development.” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 21). Yet security can hardly be understood under a singular conception “it is many things at the same time, often depending on who uses the term and for what purpose” (Dunn Cavelti and Balzacq 2017, 2). Security means different things for different people, as Wæver mentions the fears of any group, society or nation are deeply related to their history and unique experiences (Vuori 2016, 66).

To understand how security has been conceived, the first part will make a brief account of the theoretical developments that have occurred within the discipline of security studies. Later we look into the theoretical position on which this work is based, the key elements of securitization theory and post-structuralism in security studies. This work follows a group of scholars in their engaging with the post-structuralist foundations of securitization theory (Hansen 2006, 2011; Renner and Spencer 2018; Rothe 2016; Stengel 2019; Wilhelmsen 2017). I take a post-structuralist reading of securitization theory, not only for the attempt to enrich and “expand securitization theory” (Hansen 2011, 359). But as a post-structuralist reading of security centers around ‘regimes of truth’ (Aradau and Munster 2016, 76), it is the most adequate theoretical position to study how the issue of disinformation is understood as a threat, or in other words how regimes of truthfulness and falsehood are established.

2.1.1 The traditional approach to security

The traditional or orthodox approach³ to security centers around the nation-state, emphasizing its material interests and coercive power (Butler and Wolf 2019, 7). This standpoint has dominated much of the institutional approach to security, like in NATO (Vershbow 2016) or the UNDP (UNDP 1994), but it also accentuated the realist intellectual tradition as the prevailing paradigm in security studies. Though there are different sub-schools of realist thinkers, here I will mention the key assumptions around which the realist approach is built upon and that have set the bases of security studies.

Inter-human cooperation for survival against a hostile environment and the threat and/or use of force for dominance are central to realist (Wohlforth 2016, 11–12). Following Hobbes (Hobbes 2020) realists argue that humans naturally exist in a state of constant threat, from predators and other humans, and of anarchy, as there is no central governing body. Therefore, humans are constantly moved by a self-preservation instinct that prompts egoism over altruism. This *self-help or egoist* nature of humans is equally present in the nation state, as the absence of a central authority in international relations, produces an environment of constant threat (Butler and Wolf 2019, 7). Essentially the key idea of realist thinking is the notion

³ By traditional and orthodox it is meant the ideas of the past that were among the first to lay the foundations for security studies.

that the existence of multiple states in anarchy is problematic, as it causes them to compete among each other for power, resources and security (Walt 2002, 2017, 2). Therefore, as there is no central authority (Walt 2017; Wohlforth 2016) the nation state, which depends on the use of force for maintaining its sovereignty, is the central actor in realism.

In realism security threats are considered as external to the state as they emanate from an alteration of the balance of power (Shepherd 2013). Hence, security is conceived primarily as the security of the state, meaning that a state is considered to be secure if it has the power to preserve and defend its territory from the threat of other states, or from being pressured to modify its behavior and political values (Walt 2017). Therefore, the realist understanding of security and power are in fact quite narrow, as the former focuses on the survival of the state, and the latter on the military capacity of the state (Shepherd 2013).

2.2 New security perspectives.

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a breaking point for Security Studies, as events such as the ending of the Cold War with non-violent actions between the two dominant blocs; the flourishing of intra-state conflict; the growing Western 'fear of immigration'; the acceleration of environmental decay; the growing epidemics; among others demonstrated the narrowness of the military-centric agenda on security which "was analytically, politically and normatively problematic" (Buzan and Hansen 2013, 187).

The end of the Cold War created a new security context as it "encompasses much more than the contest for political supremacy in the processes of superpower rivalry" (Dalby 1997, 4). This expansion beyond political supremacy of superpowers "radically recast prevailing notions of the structure of the international system" (Butler 2020, 4). As a result a 'new security environment' emerged (Buzan 1991) one in which notions centered around state/military security seem insufficient to explain all the issues regarding security (Ackleson 2005, 169). This shift constituted a structural transformation that left analysts, academics and policymakers with a vacuum in which threats, actors, and responses, are in a constant definition, redefinition and disputation by a social and political process (Butler and Wolf 2019, 4).

For Buzan and Hansen this breaking point is understood as a deepening and broadening debate on traditional understanding of security. The former concerning with the inclusion of other levels of analysis beyond the state; and the latter on widening the understanding of security beyond a military perspective, into four more sectors: political security, economic security, societal security and environmental security (Buzan and Hansen 2013, 29).

This process of expansion led to the emergence of a plethora of positions with different theoretical backgrounds and stand points.⁴ Despite their differences their main common point is the expansion of the state center approach to security studies and challenging the 'intellectual hegemony' of realism and its assumptions.

The new approaches to security provided new frameworks and perspectives that enriched the theoretical debates regarding security. For instance feminist scholars contributed deeply by challenging the notion that the state could be the sole provider of security, and showed

⁴ For a review of the different schools and approaches to security see: (Dunn Cavelti and Balzacq 2017; Shepherd 2013)

how the state can be the cause of insecurity for different groups of people (McGlinchey et al. 2017). By adopting bottom-up approaches to security feminist research offered new perspectives that study the impact of security on everyday life (Wibben 2016, 84), and offered new accounts that challenged the division between private and public, and by extension official and unofficial accounts of security (Butler 2020, 94). Furthermore, they emphasized the need to move forward from the military approach, as a military centered perspective is unable to account for the role that structural inequalities play in security (Dalby 1997, 4).

Similarly, by examining how security studies “remains the by-product of assumptions unique to the ‘West’ and/or the ‘Global North’ as well as to a particular temporal and spatial context” (Butler 2020, 11) postcolonial approaches are able to challenge the eurocentrism of traditional security studies. Postcolonialism have highlighted the inadequacy of traditional security studies to explain the post-cold war security environment; where non-state actors, such as militia groups, transnational corporations or organized crime, play a key role in security (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). By bringing to the foreground the historical importance of colonialism, class and race relations, postcolonial scholars offer not only to point out the ‘blind spots’ in security studies; but underline the production and reproduction of binaries of self and other (Biswas 2012), of western and non-western spaces that are constructed as insecure and lawless or as in need of protection, redemption and saving (Nair 2016).

2.2.1 Securitization theory

One of the most important school of thoughts in security studies, that challenged the premises and ‘intellectual hegemony’ of realism, is the so-called Copenhagen School and its Securitization theory (ST). In their seminal work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* scholars Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, from the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI), developed the bases of ST (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). Securitization offers a constructivist framework to security that attempts to broaden the notion of security beyond the state and military approach by conceptualizing security as a process in which an issue is established in opposition of the political (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998).

ST aims to “explore the logic of security” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 5), in which political issues are moved out of the political realm, by security actors, and are constituted as security issues that must be dealt without the political deliberation, for they are framed as an existential threat and require extraordinary measures to deal with it and protect the referent object. For Buzan et al. “‘security’ is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 23). In this sense securitization is conceived as a process “through which an issue is labelled a ‘security’ issue by an (elite) actor, a process which moves the issue out of the normal political sphere and into the security sphere” (Nyman 2012, 52), through the use of discourse.

As Vuori mentions the Copenhagen school, with securitization and desecuritization, provided a model that seeks “to gain an increasingly precise understanding of who (securitizing actors) can securitize (political moves via speech acts) which issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why (perlocutionary intentions/how-causality), with what kinds of effects (inter-unit relations), and under what conditions (facilitation/impediment factors)” (Vuori 2016, 65). From this we can extract the four key elements of securitization:

The **securitization actor**, which refers to who makes the *securitizing move*, this is the discourse that seeks to move one issue from the political to the security realm (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 25).

The **referent object**, it's what needs to be secured. The thing or things that are conceived as being in existential threat and can claim a legitimacy to survive (ex: national identity from migration, the ecosystem from climate change, etc.) (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 36; Vuori 2016, 65).

The **threat**, the element that threatens the referent object. Threats and vulnerabilities can emerge from a variety of sources, but for a threat to be considered as a valid security issue it must meet specific criteria that differentiates them from the normal political issues. This means that threats have to be “staged as existential threats to a referent object by a securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement of emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 5). In this aspect securitization recuperates the realist notion of security as a survival issue (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020, 5).

The **audience**, “those who have to be ‘convinced’ for securitization to be satisfied” (Vuori 2016, 65). The audience is a key element, for securitization does not simply occur when the securitization actor presents a discourse that involves a threat to a referent object; it requires an audience to accept it as such, it is only then that an issue becomes securitized. (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 25).

Other two elements that are important to consider are the **facilitation factors and functional actors**. The first refers to those aspects that can impede or facilitate the acceptance of the securitization move; aspects such as the social conditions, or power relations. As the relationship between subjects is symmetrical the possibility of securitizing an issue depends on greatly with the position each actor has, meaning power relations are central to determining an actor's possibility of a successful securitization (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 31–33). The functional actors are actors that can affect the securitizing process, but are neither the securitization actor, the threat or the referent object yet have significant influence in decision making in the process.

At the center of ST is the notion that security issues are not objective, it is subjective in as much as it is determined by actors; but constructed intersubjectively. Securitization is not entirely subjective, as an issue is not securitized by the will of one individual; as a referent object must have legitimacy to an audience as something worth protecting, thus security is intersubjective and socially constructed (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). Security is intersubjective and social as it ultimately “rests neither with the objects nor with the subjects but among the subjects (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 31). The statements made by an actor help “to shape the contextual setting, and construct different threat images in that setting, rather than solely being reflections of an objective state of affairs” (Butler 2020, 29). It is language that allows the mediation between subjects, hence speech is essential for constructing the image of an existential threat and for implementing security measures. The speech act is the means by which the securitization actor manifests what is the threat and what is being threatened. In other words, the speech act is the means by which the securitization actor constructs what is understood as the threat and what is the referent object that is being threatened.

Therefore, the way to study security, and the process by which an issue is securitized, is to study discourse. As Buzan et al frame it in terms of a question “when does an argument with this particular rhetorical and semiotic structure achieve sufficient effect to make an audience tolerate violations of rules that would otherwise have to be obeyed?” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 25).

By conceptualizing security as socially constructed issue, that relies on discourse, securitization is understood as essentially political and non-objective. Different from the realist approach in ST threats are not a product of the anarchic system and do not emerge of such a context, but rather are a “by-product of the intersubjective constructions of actors” (Sjösted 2019, 29); this construction of threats occurs through discourse. This is a key difference with the orthodox approach as security is not simply something that is ‘out there’, but rather a process by which an issue is articulated by actors as a security threat (McGlinchey et al. 2017, 104). Hence here is a key difference between ST and the Realist approach to security, for threats are not conceived as an objective element that exist beyond that which needs to be secure; but rather something socially constructed within; meaning that a given security policy is not regarded as natural and neutral, on the contrary is a very politicized element as it is designated by decision-makers and key actors.

With the ST Buzan, Wæver and Wilde were able to broaden security beyond the traditional military approach by introducing the notion of security sectors. They identify five sectors: military, environmental, economic, societal and political security. By establishing security in terms of sectors they were able to identify new referent objects beyond those related to the state, “with referent objects varying in different sectors from individual actors to sovereignty to the global environment or economy, though the state retains privileged importance within this framework” (Nyman 2012, 52). The possibility of identifying other actors, beyond the state, is essential for this research, since the phenomena at hand, relies on multiple actors (social media platforms, foreign states, interest groups, political parties, etc). However, despite mentioning that other social entities are able to put forward an issue as a security concern, Buzan et al still consider the state the main focus (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 24). By maintaining the state as the key actor ST perpetuates a state-centered approach of traditional security studies.

2.2.2 Post-structuralist and Security Studies

The poststructuralist approach calls into question and challenges what has been presented and accepted as ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’. Drawing from the concepts and notions of different academic disciplines the post-structuralist approach parts from the idea that facts and beliefs, that are presented as ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’, are to be questioned, for they work to reinforce dominant power structures under which they were conceived. “Poststructuralism doubts the possibility of attaining universal laws or truths as there is no world that exists independently of our own interpretations” (McGlinchey et al. 2017, 56).

The physical world does not present itself in an orderly structured fashion, it is a chaotic, overwhelming, and a meaningless experience. Any attempt to structure the physical world, inevitably requires abstractions, representations and interpretations (Campbell 2016, 223). We try to make sense of ‘the world’ by different means and require abstractions, representations and interpretations, but also a language to express it, to name what we experience. When we use concepts and notions that refer to ‘nationality’, ‘humanitarian aid’, ‘power’, ‘economy’, we are employing representation, abstraction and interpretation. Even those

theories that may claim absolute ‘objectivity’, and allege “to offer a perfect resemblance of things” (Campbell 2016, 223) are not able to escape the need for interpretation. A key point of post-structuralism is that the discursive choices (metaphors, euphemisms, analogies, etc) are essential for how ‘reality’, ‘the world’ is conceived and understood; and therefore how policies and security actions are adopted (Buzan and Hansen 2013, 141).

Consequently, a poststructuralist approach rejects the positivist and liberal idea of an objective absolute universal Truth (with a capital T). Yet this should not be understood as if all personal opinions and subjective interpretations are all equally accepted. The social and inter-subject is essential for it is what allow some interpretations to become dominant and others to be forgotten or marginalize. Therefore, we can speak of truths (with a lower-case t) as in socially constructed power dominant truths.

From this perspective poststructuralist approaches to security can be understand not as an attempt to define what security is, but rather to question and challenge security as a “form of productive power that makes reality intelligible and actionable in particular ways” (Aradau and Munster 2016, 75). It’s not what security means, but how it is employed to form a representation of the world.

The theoretical bases for poststructuralists can be found in the works of Michael Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Despite there being differences between these authors they all provid a theoretical framework that “facilitate critical engagement with the ways in which political discourse and text works” (Hansen 2011, 361). Foucault’s work centers around the relation between power and knowledge, and the role of discourse in maintaining and forming power structures (See: Foucault 1980, 1981; Mills 2003). For Foucault there was a social battle for truth, but by truth he did not understood “the ‘ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted’, but rather ‘the ensemble of rules by which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’ (Foucault 1980, 132). This is not to say that Foucault rejected the possibility of improving human knowledge, as it is in the spirit of the enlightenment, but we must always be “keep under scrutiny the processes of scientific verification and approval that accord new facts and theories with legitimacy, and are aware of the way in which scientific knowledge serves particular social and power interests” (Burke 2012, 80), especially when used and developed by power interests such as the military, corporations, governments and other institutions.

Derrida build upon Saussure’s linguistics, which “understood the linguistic sign as a two part social process termed ‘signification’: the ‘sign’ is the mark, word, sound or image that refers to something, and the ‘signified’ is the mental idea of the thing to be represented” (Burke 2012, 78). Derrida develops upon this notion of the linguistic sign, and argues that meaning is not only by the relations within the elements of the sign, but within the relations of the sing with other sings; each concept, according to Derrida is “inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (Burke 2012, 80). Language is understood as a system of sings that work in a differential manner, and meaning is structured not by “the essence of a thing itself but through a series of juxtapositions, where one element is valued over its opposite” (Wilhelmsen 2017, 170).

In this way, the meaning of a sing depends on the oppositions and relations to the other sings it tis linked to. It is in this manner that ‘security’ derives its meaning from the other concept ‘insecurity’ to which is bound, and the other associations it is linked to ‘migration’, ‘boarders’, ‘military’, etc. (Burke 2012, 80–82). This is how attributions of insecurity are

bounded to specific groups of people. Talking about migration as a threat and in a specific time- think post 09/11- means referring to specific groups of people ('threat' 'midel-easterns', 'muslims', etc) as security threats. It is for this reasons that any knowledge, including that produced within Security Studies, must not be taken as an objective observation that reflect 'reality out there'; rather, analyses of security were said to partake in the very constitution and reification of social reality" (Aradau and Munster 2016, 76).

Therefore, security can be understood as "a 'regime of truth' whose emergence and stabilization is made possible through the reiteration of (scientific) discourses, the deployment of power relations, and mobilization of methods" (Aradau and Munster 2016, 76). Therefore, to speak of disinformation, misinformation and/or fake news, is to speak of truths. Of regimes of truths which entail power structures of how what is considered true is established. Which raises important question as to who establishes the limits between what is to be consider truth or fake? Who is to be established as the authority that rejects others as fakes? (Zimdars and McLeod 2020, 45).

As post-structuralists question the regimes of truth they have been criticized for 'relativizing' truth. Critics of post-structuralism have alleged that the so-called academic post-modernism has made truth irrelevant, then all truths are equally valid (Ball 2017; D'Ancona 2017; McIntyre 2018). Hence, blaming post-structuralists for laying the grounds for the post-truth era of politics, and considering it a threat to liberal democracy and modernity (Pluckrose 2017; Renner and Spencer 2018).

These critiques come from a wrong and very shallow understanding of post-structuralism, as it is not a dogmatic approach that rejects facts. These simplistic readings reduce post-structuralism to "there is no truth" and "all claims are equally valid" (Renner and Spencer 2018, 317). For critiques "what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts" (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2019, 1).

The point of post-structuralism is no to say anything goes; but to acknowledge how through power relations "particular ideas and practices gain the status of 'facts' or 'common sense' knowledge as a result of the way in which they are represented, abstracted or interpreted" (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2019, 2). Therefore, poststructuralism is not going to ask if a given statement is truth or not, but it will ask how statements are label as 'truths', how truths are mobilized and formed (Epstein 2008). Hance, poststructuralism provides the optimal theoretical frame to study fake news, misinformation and disinformation as it centers around questions of "who is allowed to speak, the positions that can be acceptably articulated, the institutions that are able to serve as conduits of speech, and the institutions that store and distribute what is said" (Grayson 2016, 75).

2.3 A Post-structuralist reading of Securitization theory

As critics have pointed out ST is not without its faults, limitations, contradictions, ambivalence and at some point, vagueness (See: Balzacq 2011; Buzan and Hansen 2013; Côté 2016; Floyd 2016; Knudsen 2001; McDonald 2008; Rothe 2016; Wilhelmsen 2017; Williams 2003). Some of the main critiques to ST are: a) It only focus on single speech acts; b) an underrated

role of the audience, and a deficient incorporation of power, and context into the theory; c) and a simplistic understanding of the link between securitization and the adoption of measures, as the adoption of extraordinary measures is conceived to follow straight forward and unproblematically the successful securitization (Rothe 2016, 296). Furthermore, many variants of ST have been developed, which makes it difficult to engage in a critique at depth of all of them⁵ (See: Balzacq 2011; Baysal 2020; Buzan and Hansen 2013; Knudsen 2001; Stritzel 2007). For this reason, this section will only address the post-structuralist ‘variant’ or reading that this work makes of classical ST and the work of Buzan, Wæver and Wilde; and it also engages some of the main criticisms made to securitization and post-structuralism.

The proposition of scholars that have engage in a post-structuralist readings of securitization (See: Hansen 2011; Renner and Spencer 2018; Rothe 2016; Stengel 2019; Wilhelmsen 2017)⁶ is not to offer a “an exoneration nor a canonization” (Hansen 2011, 359) of Buzan and Wæver’s work, but a “(re)constructive, encouraging reading that identifies the post-structuralist gist of ST in order to push that theory further” (Hansen 2011, 359). Hance, we must first start by point out the post-structuralist epistemological origins that form the basis to the ST.

ST has a ‘post-structuralist genealogy’ grounded in Buzan and Wæver’s text (Hansen 2011). The intellectual genealogy of securitization is complex and with ambiguities; as it merged elements form post-structuralism, yet withholding others form realism and (neo)realism.

The speech act is at the center of Buzan, Wæver and Wilde’s theorization of security, for it is the way to study security (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 25). The speech act is considered “essential in the construction of threat images and in the execution of security policy” (Butler 2020, 29). To name something a security issue involves modifying its meaning. As it was mentioned earlier, in reference to Saussure’s concept of the linguistic sign, and Derrida’s development of it, language is socially constructed and has the capacity of being modified. As Hansen point out the understanding of language as a structure, that is also unstable and can be modify, is at the center of post-structuralism (Hansen 2011, 361). The notion of a ‘speech act’ implies a specific understanding of language, which is based on post-structuralism. This post-structuralist understanding of language is essential for ST as the act of naming something a security issue, of naming a threat and a referent object, entails the ability to modify language structures to establish new relationships of meaning. When something goes from being a regular element to a threat, the structures of language are transformed. “Securitization specifically rearranges (at least) two discursive elements, the (soon to be) threatening object and the referent object, in such a way that one is articulated as an existential threat to the other’s physical security” (Stengel 2019, 300).

Furthermore, the work of Derrida, especially his understanding of language as made up of dichotomous pairs, has been essential for unveiling how the construction of discourses manifest power relations. As binary oppositions are socially constructed, they reflect the power relations within such society. Hance, the meaning of a sing is not natural, dichotomies “establish a relation of power such that one element in the binary is privileged” (Wilhelmsen

⁵ Specifically, the sociological approach to securitization of the Paris School, that emphasizes the daily social practices of security over the linguistic approach of traditional ST (See: Balzacq 2011).

⁶ These scholars base their poststructuralis appraoch on the works not only of Derrida, Sosurre, and Fouclkau, but also on the work of Judith butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe (See: Butler 1993, 2021; Laclau 2005, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

2017, 170). Signs, by working in un-equal dichotomies, revile the superior–inferior relationships socially established.

The work of Laclau and Mouffe, has been fundamental in studying how discourses create these oppositions. (See: Errejón and Mouffe 2016; Laclau 2005; Laclau and Bhaskar 1998; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Meaning and identity are socially constructed “through a series of signs that are linked to each other to constitute relations of sameness as well as through differentiation to another series of juxtaposed signs” (Hansen 2006, 37). Therefore, meaning is temporarily fixed, as it is only based on the relations with other signs. For Laclau and Mouffe, ‘empty signifiers’(See: Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2001) -also known as floating signifiers- are linguistic elements “whose meaning varies from one articulation to another” (Farkas and Schou 2019, 47). In this sense, words like nation, freedom or justice absorb their meaning from the relation they hold with other signs, hence we consider that security is an empty signifier as its meaning drives from its relation to a threat.

Drawing on Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe establish that a discourse uses ‘chains of equivalence’, that connect one signifier to other signifiers to establish equivalence or difference between the signs. Through this process ‘logics of equivalence’ and ‘the logic of difference’ are formed (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 113–20). Hence, people that are migrating can be equated with a threat or humans in need of refuge. In these example ‘migrants’ are an empty signifier, as its meaning depend on the specific political context in which they are invoked (Aslanidis 2016; Laclau 2005). In the same sense certain speeches (think of religious discourses) can be equated to a threat and others are seen as valid and legitimate. Furthermore, as “threat constructions usually appear in discourse in conjunction with demands for certain policy measures”(Stengel 2019, 304). The ‘logics of equivalence’ can help understand how extortionary measures are linked to saving the referent object, and the logic of difference to understand the distinction between normal politics and extortionary measures.

What makes a migrant be seen in one way or another depends on the social acceptance of the discourse, that is, whether the ‘chains of equivalence’ of one discourse or another are able to produce consent between the different actors in a society (Rothe 2016, 46). Thus “social reality is always crisscrossed with antagonism and hegemonic struggles” (Farkas and Schou 2020, 104–5); as different groups, are in constant competition to impose to others their narrative, their understanding of reality. In this manner social reality is both contingent, as it is always open for contestation, yet in practice is closed as there is a struggle hegemony (Farkas and Schou 2019; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This struggle for hegemony renders that any climate of social objectivity is constituted by means of power (Mouffe 1999).

These theoretical bases are essential to push the theory of securitization further which might allow a critical engagement with security policies and the politics of security, “that is, the way in which security discourses form the objects of which they speak ” (Hansen 2011, 358). In this sense, a post-structuralist reading of ST gives us the appropriate framework to study how non-state actors understand, form and shape the discourses around fake news, disinformation and misinformation in social media.

In order to push that theory further it is necessary to address the critiques to ST from a post-structuralist reading. Some of the main critiques to ST have come from feminist and decolonial scholars, which mention that the epistemological approach of a speech act is based on the presuppose assumption of the “existence of a situation in which speech is indeed possible.” (Hansen 2000, 285). The emphasis made by securitization on speech acts turns out to be problematic “with what can be called ‘security as silence’: a situation where the potential

subject of security has no, or limited, possibility of speaking its security problem” (Hansen 2000, 294). Additionally, for McDonald by focusing only on dominant voices, and what those voices designate as security and threat, “is normatively problematic, contributing to the silencing of marginal voices and ignoring the ways in which such actors have attempted precisely to contest these security constructions” (McDonald 2008, 574).

Who becomes a securitizing actor depends on the possibility that an actor has of speaking. Hence, those who can speak, who are considered agents with power to speak, are those who can be constituted as securitization actors, and those who cannot -think of communities that are socially marginalized by gender, race, or social class, and therefore are not deemed as vocal political actors- are unable to become securitization actors. Essentially, these criticisms focus on an issue of power and who is considered to have legitimacy to be securitization actors.

Whereas Buzan et al do acknowledge that the relationship among subjects is unequal and asymmetrical, and thus this influences the possibility of a successful securitization, as the position of the securitization actor will determine the effectiveness of its discourse (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 31). Furthermore, they recognize that security can work to “silence opposition and has given power holders many opportunities to exploit ‘threats’ for domestic purposes” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 29). Yet they do not emphasize on how ST, in its seminal work, does not recognize how within a discourse some actors are acknowledged as having authority and others don’t. How a security narrative creates boundaries that establish a binary opposition between the threat and those that are threatened, the boundary between the Self and the Other (Wilhelmsen, 2017). A post-structuralist deepening of the theory, can precisely address this issue as it draws upon not only on how security discourses form the objects and issues they speak of; but also how narratives provide some subjects with power and authority, and others are marginalized and cast off (Hansen 2011; Wilhelmsen 2017).

Questions over if securitization can be applied beyond the geographical borders were it was conceived have been an integral part of academic discussions, even from some of the first proponents of the theory (See: Greenwood and Wæver 2013). Some of the eurocentrism critiques to securitization are built around whether the application of the theory out-side of western liberal democracies affects the theory (See: Bilgin 2010, 2011; Wilkinson 2007).

However, for other scholars, such as Howell and Richter-Montpetit, the criticism of Eurocentricity is not based on whether the theory is modified or sustained when applied beyond Western territories. For these scholars, the criticism comes from the “conceptual apparatus and, in particular, its core concepts of politics and security” (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020, 17). For these scholars, securitization has a deep and fundamental Eurocentric and racist perspective. For Howell and Richter-Montpetit ST uses the notion of ‘normal politics’ understanding it as a civilized and reasoned *status quo*; that is disrupted by the securitization proses which is a “potential regression into a racially coded uncivilized ‘state of nature’” (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020, 3–4). Howell and Richter-Montpetit reading of ST understands that this notion of ‘normal politics’ assumes that the status quo is non-confrontational or problematic; that it is a ‘civilized’ state, hence it councils the sexual, class, and racial violence that occurs within a society. This is most evident when considering the process of securitization and desecuritization, as the latter involves a notion of ‘getting things back to normal’ and therefore seen positively (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 29). This critique, that ‘normal politics’ is constituted as non-problematic, is important and highlights some of the shortcomings of traditional ST. However, this research proposes that it can be overcome through a post-structuralist reading, as it is explained latter.

For Balzacq the speech act approach does not provide sufficient grounding for analyzing security practices (Balzacq 2005). According to Balzacq security is understood by Buzan and Wæver as 'self-referential activity', which differs from an 'intersubjective process' (Hansen 2011). The difference is that the former "understands concepts as shaping 'their' contexts, in principle to the point where 'what is "out there" is [thus] irrelevant'" (Hansen 2011, 359), hence this is an 'internalist view' of security. For Balzacq this 'self-referential activity' neglects the audience (Balzacq 2005, 179). Balzacq calls for security as 'an intersubjective process', this is an 'external view' as it understands that threats are 'external or brute threats', "that is, threats that do not depend on language mediation to be what they are" (Balzacq 2005, 181). This understanding of security calls for a view of language "that does not [work as] constructing reality but 'at best' shaping our perception of it" (Hansen 2011, 359).

This is how Balzacq tries to provide a more grounded epistemology to securitization. However, as Hansen mentions self-referential does not mean that it is disengaged from an intersubjective process. As mentioned, in ST threats are not externally constituted, but socially constructed within a society by actors, through a process. This suggests that naming something as a security issue, can reveal us more not of that 'externality' that is threatening the referent object; but rather it reveals more of those who consider it a threat. The naming of migration as a danger, tells us more about who is feeling threatened than what the 'external object' that constituted the threat is. For Buzan et al security is self-referential "not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat" (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998); hence self-referential only appoints to that notion that there is no extra-discursive element that can ground security (Hansen 2011), it is only the naming of an issue as a security issue which makes it such.

In a post-structuralist reading securitization is not produced by the utterance of one single actor and it's not a linear process (Rothe 2016). As Wilhelmsen mentions, securitization is produced by various texts that represent an issue as an existential threat, it is the "result of an intersubjective struggle through texts emanating from 'securitizing actors' and 'audience' over what level of difference and danger to attach to something and manifests itself in material emergency practices (Wilhelmsen 2017, 167). In this sense Wilhelmsen understands securitization as a discursive co-constitutive process of legitimation, in which securitization is not a straightforward "process from securitizing actor through audience acceptance and to emergency measures" (Wilhelmsen 2017, 169). Moreover, for Rothe this co-constructive process is the emergence of 'discourse coalitions'; which refers to "a group of actors from different subject positions, which share a certain set of narratives and storylines" (Rothe 2016, 36). Different discourse coalitions are in competition for the dominance over the representation of the issue at stake, this competition are the discursive struggles.

The post-structuralist approach, by understanding securitization as a co-constructive process, it puts the emphasis on two key elements. First, the discursive practices. This differentiates it from the actor-centered approach of traditional ST. In the traditional ST the securitization actor is the "driving force in the process, but also his words are accorded status as final and decisive" (Wilhelmsen 2017, 170). Which establishes the audience as not taking part in the inter-subjective process, but also understands security as one individual action. Secondly, it puts the emphasis on a co-constructive process or a 'discourse coalitions', which involves both the securitization actor and the audience, which is recognized as having a more active role. One of the criticisms of the original ST is the passive role that the audience had in accepting or denying the speech act (Balzacq 2005). Post-structuralism, by conceptualizing security as part of a discursive struggle, in which there is a constant construction and re-

construction of reality, understands that securitization is a “gradual, intersubjective process” (Wilhelmsen 2017, 167). If the conceptual widening of the security concept achieved by ST recognized the role of non-state actors, the post-structuralist reading of ST broadens their scope of action, by not focusing on the action of one individual actor (usually the state); but the dynamics and struggles of several actors in co-constructing, re-shaping and struggling for the hegemony of a discourse, through the use of “metaphors, opposing storylines and narratives that make sense of a problem at stake” (Rothe 2016, 36). From this perspective the aim of securitization can be understood as seeking to “produce consent and a common will of a political community. Thereby it either defends and stabilizes an existing hegemony or fundamentally challenges it, if applied by offensive hegemonic projects” (Rothe 2016, 63). Therefore, the post-structuralist reading of ST is useful for the research objective of analyzing the security discourse of several non-state actors, around different issues where information in social media is constructed as a threat.

As it was mentioned earlier post-structuralism has been criticized and accused of making truth irrelevant. It has even been claimed that postmodernism, which has deep post-structuralist foundations, is responsible for Trump and right-wing scientific denial. For this critics there is a ‘science wars’ (See: McIntyre 2018; Warner 2011).

Drawing from the work of Laclau and Mouffe a post-structuralist approach can help us address these critics, as well as those that claim that an internalist position disregards context; and those that mention that ‘normal politics’ is constituted as non-problematic in securitization. As Laclau and Mouffe point out, their analysis “rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices [...] every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 93). What they denied is not that “objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 94). Therefore, the criticisms that point out that the context is denied, come from an idea of the existence of ‘objects’ external to discourse. The existence of these objects is not denied, what is affirmed is that they are objects because they are part of a discourse. As Rothe mentions, in his reading of Derrida, “is not the opposition between text and context but the radical contingency of meaning” (Rothe 2016, 33) which is at the center of post-structuralism. In this regard, ST’s understanding of a threat is deeply post-structuralist, as it is conceived as a discursive construction. The post-structuralist position does not deny the context, on the contrary, it is at the heart, as it analyses the discourses that shape reality, that is, the discursive practices constitute the contexts.

In Buzan et al context is engaged in three ways. First in reference to the different dynamics of securitization that occur in each sector (military, social, political, economical, etc). Second, by the facilitating conditions, that are the contextual elements that allow a speech act to be successful securitizes. Finally, in emphasizing the role the audience has in accepting, backing up, the speech act (McDonald 2008). Yet, for some scholars ST has not consider the context sufficiently, as ST downplays the relevance of contextual factors and presents a limited definition of context, which centers only on the moment of intervention. According to these scholars “the potential for security to be constructed over time through a range of incremental processes and representations is not addressed” (McDonald 2008, 564).

The post-structuralist reading of ST addresses directly those last critique, as we review the narratives that have been built around social networks. In traditional ST “facilitating conditions are the conditions under which the speech act works, in contrast to cases in which the

act misfires or is abused” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 32), hence they are understood as externalities that condition the possibility of a security discourse. From the post-structuralist reading we take the ‘facilitating conditions’ are those narratives that allow the creation of a security discourse. Meaning, the discourses that co-created ‘chains of equivalence’ that link an issue to an existential security threat that requires political action. As Stengel mentions hegemonic projects are usually constructed using some combination and rearticulation of old and new discursive elements, which allows them to be made credible (Stengel 2019, 304). The narratives around social media are the ‘facilitating conditions’, that allow to link the dissemination of information through social media as a threat. In this sense, we extend the limits indicated in ST, since we approach the subject beyond the moment of intervention of the securitization actor by analyzing other discourses that construct and re-construct the securitization of an issue. In these sense, post-structuralism, provides a way to analyze how discourses around social media and the ‘threat of disinformation’ have been construct and re-construct; and “interrogate the ways in which the social structures [have] developed that enabled a politics of ‘post-truth’ to become not only possible, but also palatable to various groups” (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2019, 3).

Those critics that point that ‘normal politics’ is constituted as non-problematic in Buzan, Wæver and Wilde’s Buzan theorization of security, do have a point in highlighting a short-coming of ST. However, this limitation can be overcome with Laclau and Mouffe’s considerations. A post-structuralist analysis of security discourses engages in how actors understand and define ‘normal politics’, what issues are seen as un-problematic, and what issues are seen as problematic; as it is considered that the term ‘normal politics’ is not natural, on the contrary it is highly politicized. As Mouffe mentions “any social objectivity is ultimately political and that it has to show the traces of exclusion, which governs its constitution” (Mouffe 1999, 752–53). In this regard, the theoretical position assumed by this research critically engages with those voices that vaticinate a post-truth era and claim that ‘normal politics’ is being destroyed by the ‘end of truth’.

In this respect, seeing post-structuralism as responsible for the post-truth ‘crisis’ and the alleged war against science not only shows a simplistic reading of the theory. It also denies its possibility to contribute to explain this phenomenon. If we take that post-structuralism is a theoretical approach “in which “the role of “truth” or rather truths play an essential role in the theoretical assumptions, it seems plausible to assume that post-structuralism has something to say about “post- truth” world order.”(Renner and Spencer 2018, 315–16).

In summary, from the post-structuralist reading of ST securitization is a process of discursive struggle that does not occur in one single speech event; but rather through an ongoing co-constructive process that forms discourse coalitions that are in struggle for hegemony (Rothe 2016). The securitization process is embedded within broader narratives of political struggle, and a complex political landscape. Therefore, securitization can be seen as a struggle for the reconfiguration of the political landscape (Rothe 2016). Each discourse coalition articulates new and reshapes existing storylines and narratives around the security issue. These articulation and rearticulation, through the signification and re-signification of symbols, entail the formation of chains of equivalence that establish difference (antagonistic other). A successful securitization, a implies “the construction of hegemonic projects that seek to create acceptance” (Stengel 2019, 299) constructing a threat and a referent object, through the articulation of equivalent chains.

3 Objectives, Research Questions, Methodology and Data

This research is a qualitative study of secondary data. It draws on discourse analysis (DA) to study how non-state actors, specifically NGO's, civil society organizations and academics, construct a security discourse around information dissemination in social media. More precisely these research does a post-structuralist reading of securitization theory to analyze how the security discourse of the selected non-state actors construct the 'threat', what is the referent object that is threatened, and what are the remedies or solutions that are articulated.

3.1 Objective

To analyse how non-state actors, specifically NGO's, civil society organizations and academics, have constructed a security discourse around the phenomenon of 'misinformation', 'disinformation' and 'fake news' in social media, through the construction of a threat and a referent object.

3.2 Research Questions

The research questions are:

- 1) How has information in social media been discursively identified as a security issue by the selected non-state actors (NGO's, civil society organizations and academics)?
- 2) How has the security discourse of the selected actors constructed the threats and referent objects?

From those questions we can develop sub-questions that will provide more depth to the analysis of a security discourse of social media and information. As Stenegl mentions, in a security discourse the construction of a threat tends to appear in co-occurrence with requests, positions or demands for adopting policy measures (Stengel 2019, 304). Therefore, a) *we must enquire what policy measures or extraordinary measures are articulated in relation to preserve the referent object from the threat?*

Furthermore, the issue at hand involves several actors such as: social media companies, content creators, social media users, governments, international regulatory bodies, etc. As post-structuralist power relations are central, we must analyse b) *how different actors are identified and mentioned in the security discourse, are they considered legitimate actors? c) what responsibility or role do they give them in terms of forming the threat and in the implementation of policy to protect the referent object?*

3.3 Justification

To analyze how non-state actors articulate a security discourse is to study how the co-construction of discourses is forged and mobilized. As mentioned, to study the security discourse of fake news involves addressing how regimes of truthfulness and falsehood are established for political struggles. Hence, these research aims to contribute to the discussions around the conformation and function of discursive strategies of political struggle.

Although there are other non-state actors, such as the media. I focus on NGOs, civil society and academia because they are actors that have legitimacy, they are recognized actors to talk about the issues and their statements and reports are reproduced by the media. The selected actors are actors who serve to support political discourses, who have legitimacy and have actively participated in defining the discourse around information on social networks. In this sense they form part of a discursive co-community. Likewise, the actors are international, as they study the phenomenon in several countries.

3.4 Method of analysis

The theoretical posture guiding this research is a poststructuralist reading of ST. Consequently, certain ontological and epistemological premises, regarding language and the role it has in constructing the social world, are taken. Essentially, these refer to the way language is conceived in post-structuralism: as unstable and non-neutral and contingent social phenomena (Torfing 2005, 22). Therefore, the particular post-structuralist understanding of language, knowledge, and power, does not only provide the theoretical background, but also guides the methodological framework, as in DA “*theory and method are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study*” (Marianne. Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 4).

As these research draws from the work of poststructuralist scholars to do a reading of ST, it is coherent that the poststructuralist discourse theory (PDT) of the Essex School, as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Bhaskar 1998; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Panizza 2005), be the guiding method for analyzing the data. The work of Laclau and Mouffe has provided the theoretical foundations to expand ST (Hansen 2011; Rothe 2016; Stengel 2019; Wilhelmsen 2017), but it has also served to develop a school within discourse analysis.

However, as pointed out by various scholars the work of Laclau y Mouffe despite having a rich and strong focus on theoretical issues, it falls short of “more practical questions related to design and planning of empirical research” (Marttila 2016, 2). The foundational text of the Essex-School, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), provides a complex and deep epistemological perspectives, yet it does not provide practical tools for a discourse analysis.

There have been different efforts to solve the lack of methodological tools of PDT (See: Glynnos and Howarth 2007; Howarth 2005; Marttila 2016). This research follows Marttila’s approach to providing PDT with methodological tools as it is based on a theoretical construction of the research objective. The central epistemic base of post-structuralism and PDT means “there is no such thing as brute facts, but only theoretically informed and culturally shaped descriptions of a discursively constructed reality” (Torfing 2005, 27); which means that the objects of our research are “not “ready to be identified and mapped”: they must be

elaborately conceptualized and constructed (Marttila 2016, 138). Hence, the research must start by constructing the research objective.

In this work the research object is constructed from two elements. First, a detailed and close reading of different texts created by the selected actors. By reading reports, press release, blogs and other materials in which information in social media is regarded as a threat. Furthermore, this reading process also allows to identify narrative themes and storylines around which social media, misinformation, disinformation and fake news are articulated as a threat. These narrative themes constitute the elements under which the analysis of the data was structured. The three thematic narratives around social media and disinformation that were identified are: a) the Covid-19 pandemic; b) Social polarization; c) the regulation of content in social media as a threat to freedom of expression.

The second element for the construction of the research object, involved the “theory-driven co-construction of the research object [which] argues that we are the more capable of observing the world in accordance with our consciously chosen epistemic horizon ” (Marttila 2016, 139–40). As the theoretical framework of this research is a post-structuralist reading of ST, the securitization process developed by Buzan et al., identifies the logic of security, which involves the construction of a threat and a referent object. Therefore, our research object is constructed through the theory driven analysis of the security discourse the selected non-state actors.

Finally, PDA’s theoretical framework identifies the absence of any objective foundations for meaning, therefore highlighting the “the contingent formation of social phenomena” (Torfing 2005, 22). The contingency of socially meaningful elements creates the opportunity to disarticulate and dissect the social accepted implicitness, understandings off and the notions taken for granted of the research object (Marttila 2013, 2015, 2016). Therefore, our research must analyze what is presupposed and taken as socially self-evident and meaningful in the construction of the ‘threat’ and the referent object in the security discourse of the selected non-state actors.

3.5 Data collection

Marittal points out our sample must cover a significant part of the population, that adheres or identifies to the same discourse; as discourse are co-constructed from points of coherence of different subjects, we cannot reconstruct a discourse from a singular articulation (Marttila 2015). As the objective of this research is to analyze the construction of a security discourse by non-state actors the main source of data are the reports, research documents and policy briefings published by different NGO’s, civil society organizations and academics.

All selected documents are of public access online and a temporality starting in 2016 up to 2021. Although interviews and statements of relevant actors, such as NGO’s staff or academics, can be useful, these research focuses mainly on the written text of reports, research documents and policy briefings because these are documents that are used to support policy implementation. The use of other sources, such as press clips, blogs, interviews and speeches, is only occasionally use only with the objective of emphasize any point mentioned in the reports. Furthermore, in some cases sources that are not originated by the selected non-state actors, like international governmental organizations, are used. In these cases, the documents are used to highlight the co-contractiveness of discourse that shows similar articulations and to refer to the role of other actors.

The minimal criterion for selecting the material was that it described the online information as a threat/danger. These means that phrases like ‘combating disinformation’ or ‘fighting fake news’ are taken as a threat identification. The second criteria, and in accordance with the first sub-question, is that the threats are considered to be in need of some sort of *political action*. In this point we differ from the traditional ST, since we do not take a criterion as strict as the *exceptional measures*. This because the term makes a reference to a division between exceptional moment and *normal politics* which as mentioned is problematic; and because the term *political action* denotes a responsibility of certain actors to engage in action.

3.6 Scope and Limitations

Though discourse can be articulated beyond language, through nonlinguistic means (Shepherd 2013; Torfing 2005; Wodak 2001, 2009). Yet this research is limited to the analysis of text, as the objectives of these research nonlinguistic articulations seem inadequate, as we focus on the articulation of institutions, not on subject, it is in texts such as reports, that a general institutional discourse is best expressed.

This work is limited to analyze the discourses of specific non-state actors, NGO’s, civil society organizations, and academics. Other important ones, such as those of media outlets, have been excluded. However, we recognize that this is a limitation, since the co-contraction of a discourse involves the articulation by various actors. Yet many media outlets, based their discourse on the reports of non-state actors.

One of the limitations of this investigation is that the texts analyzed are different, in their form, objectives and contexts. As the texts are not all the same nor do they have the same intention, some address specific situations, like elections in different countries or political violence; others seek to influence political actors explicitly; and others analyzed how information in social media is distributed and/or consumed. Yet, what they all have in common is that they consider that there is a threat in the way information is distributed on social media, and they propose measures to confront the threat they identify.

Furthermore, the discourse of the actors changes over time and given that this is a very active topic in which new voices are constantly added and new themes emerge, it is essential to point out that this research does not intend to present the only and final discourse of the actors.

Due to limitations this research does not address a key issue, privacy and surveillance. One of the most important limitations in this research is that the security discourse around privacy and surveillance in social media is not analyzed. Privacy and surveillance are intimately related to disinformation, since the logic of the algorithms that disseminate information is the same that produces invasive and surveillance practices. Furthermore, the issue of surveillance has motivated many discourses around secularization (See: Zuboff 2019). In a certain sense disinformation, misinformation, fake news, surveillance and privacy, are different sides of a same coin of a security discourse.

4 Narratives around social media

In the first part this chapter offers a review of the different discourses around how the new ‘information ecosystem’ created by social media works and how it has been acknowledged as affecting the way in which information is created, exchanged and distributed. In the section of ‘narratives of the information ecosystem’ I identify the themes that group the texts that are analyzed. In the second part it looks into how social media functions and the role of algorithms. It is important to point out this operation since a narrative of neutrality has been built around algorithms, however algorithms are a language, and therefore they serve as a mechanism to create, interpret and recreate reality.

4.1 Narratives of the information ecosystem

It seems that through history the appearance and development of every new technological innovation has caused both the emergence of its detractors and supporters (Schiffrin 2017). Those that oppose the new technologies tend to have a ‘pessimistic’ approach to the disruptive negative impact that technology will have in human life. In a sense we could say that there has always been a discourse that constructs a threat around technological developments. Just think of the motorized vehicle or electricity, and how they were portrayed as a threat. On the other hand, ‘optimists’ views exalt how technology will liberate humanity from oppression or dull and mundane tasks.

Social media in particular, and the internet in general, have been no different (Schiffrin 2017). Ever since the 1990s, when personal computers were popularized, and the internet -beyond the military use- started to emerge, both detractors and supporters voiced their opinions and forecasts of how this new technology would affect society. Early enthusiasts praised the democratic non-hierarchical communication potential of the internet. The new form of communication offered the possibility to break the top-down centralized power structures of traditional politics and media (television, radio and print) (Castells 2002, 2011; Coleman and Gøtze 2002; Norris 2002). These new communication environment has as key characteristics a ‘radical decentralization’, and its dominated by a ‘user-contributors’ logic, in which the consumer of information can be at the same time the producer; and can share and spread over different networks and platforms (Davis 2019, 171–73).

Internet offered the possibility to democratized information shearing mechanisms, as well as to give voice to largely neglected sections of the public. This democratic possibility would not only benefit western countries, but would strengthen fragile democratic systems; and would weaken the structures of authoritarian states, where access to the media is monopolized (Coleman 2017; Davis 2019; Howard and Hussain 2013; Norris 2002). For optimists, the world would become a more enlightened place:

“As an unprecedented number of individuals would gain easy access to the large amounts of information uploaded by many different players, from individuals to media outlets, to organizations and government authorities” (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen 2020, 18).

And those optimists came to be proven right as in the post 2008 recession world social media was praised as a revolutionary tool which democratized the public space, making it accessible to almost everyone everywhere (Castells 2011, 2012; Shirky 2011; Tufekci 2018). Following the 2008 financial crisis social media became the key platform in which a plethora of social

movements worldwide formed. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados in Spain, #YoSoy132 in Mexico, #MeToo or the Arab Spring (Howard and Hussain 2013).

The 'positivist' had a strong argument, as social media allowed political actors, that were once in the margins of mainstream politics (Jungherr, Schroeder, and Stier 2019), burst onto the political scene, breaking the deadlock and stagnation that had plagued traditional democratic politics for several years (Crouch 2004; Hay 2007; Mair 2013).

All of these movements used social media as a mechanism for organizing and distributing information. For Castells the internet facilitate the formation of networks of outrage and hope (Castells 2012). Despite being movements in different locations, and with diverse social demands, they had as a common element: the use of digital platforms for the formation of social networks. Internet's capacity to rapidly exchange information allowed them to articulate and organize to occupy physical spaces and protest. Social media platforms were more than tools for organizing protests. They serve as organizational models. As social media gave the possibility for anyone to participate, they provided a fast pace, decentralized, open and horizontal model, that contrasted with the top-down scheme of traditional politics (Fenton 2016, 24–51).

The exchange of information through social media has empowered individuals to share personal stories and bring to the public discussion's important social issues; like in the feminist movements, where hashtags like #MiPrimerAcoso or #balancetonporc, allowed women to expose cases of sexual harassment (Garza 2020). Social media's capacity to give individuals the freedom to exchange information and articulate demands led them to be seen as the 'great democratizing tool' which allowed citizens to voice their complains, organize and interact directly with politicians (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen 2020).

The 'optimist's' view fits very well within the narrative of an 'eternal liberal present' of the post-cold war era. For authors such as Francis Fukuyama the end of the Soviet Union meant the end of the possibility of any counter-hegemonic alternative to the western liberal-democratic project (Fukuyama 2012). This signified the end of history, as communism and fascism had been defeated there were no ideological struggles left. The lack of an antagonistic opposition to liberalism meant that humanity would be entering into a post-ideological age. In this context, the internet could only be a force for good, spreading liberal principles around the world. Internet was seen as the means by which the overall wealth and freedom of every individual in the world would be increased. It was the tool to include more people in the "virtuous circle of liberal democratic governance and market economies" (Mutimer 2009, 54).

Social media companies certainly saw themselves as that positive force in the world. Google used the motto "Don't be evil", and had established its mission "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" (Google 1998). Similarly, during the Arab Spring Twitter implied a self-presentation image as "a force for good in the world, on the side of the people and their revolutions" (Tufekci 2018). Social media firms constructed an optimistic narrative around themselves as good-natured, almost charitable initiatives, that have a positive impact in society. By connecting people and providing information social media was making the world "a more open and transparent place" (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen 2020, 20). Despite forging themselves as new gatekeeper's social media platforms didn't see themselves as such, on the contrary they were breaking the traditional gatekeepers, and they were just 'neutral platforms' with unbiased technological developments (Tufekci 2018) to spread all information for everyone to access.

By 2016 this ‘positive’ narrative was challenged, and now it was the ‘pessimist’ time to be ‘proven right’. In the past decade different cases world-wide have showed how social media and tech companies can have a negative impact on society, by affecting democratic process, fostering hate speech and social polarization.

As internet eroded the role of traditional gatekeepers -or in the ‘optimist’ language ‘democratized the role of the gatekeeper’- information ceased to be mediated by editors, publishers or broadcasters⁷. The ‘democratization of gatekeepers’ brought about not only a more open range of ideas, but “at the same time, it raises some disturbing questions about how we acquire and verify knowledge” (Daniels 2014, 143). This introduced an important ‘epistemological challenge’, as ‘pessimist’ point out it became more difficult to scrutinize the veracity of information, assessing what's truth and valid in the new information ecosystem became a challenge (Daniels 2014; Schou and Farkas 2016).

The most famous cases is Cambridge Analytical, in which the London based firm, specializing in electoral spins and influencing elections, gained access to the data of around 50-90 million Facebook users, through the research of Aleksandr Kogan a psychologist and neuroscientist at University of Cambridge.⁸ Kogan had collected the data through surveys and sign up apps that took information from the user’s Facebook profile and their Facebook friends without their consent (Nature 2018). This data allowed Cambridge Analytica to create profiles of voters according to their habits, age, socio-economic position, location, among others to target them with tailored made advertising and propaganda. This case showed the mechanisms by which social media served to gather user’s information to create profiles for targeted political advertisement containing misleading information. Cambridge Analytical worked for the Trump campaign and for UK referendum Leave campaign (Zuboff 2019, 277–78).

Furthermore, the implication of the Russian government which “sought to accentuate existing social conflicts to affect the electoral behavior of select groups” (McCombie, Uhlmann, and Morrison 2020, 95) by disseminating false or misleading information through social media in the US elections of 2016 and 2020 (Barnes 2021; Polyakova 2020) showed how foreign interest can use technological platforms to affect public opinion.

In countries like Poland, Brazil and Mexico consultancy companies, that work indiscriminately for any party or politician who is willing to pay, have create social media profiles that seek to emulate real life citizens, these accounts are used in online voting preference polls and survey. These accounts, also known as bots and trolls are used to silence opponents, by creating noise and diversion on social media, or attacking opponents by flooding social media with targeted messages (Bader 2018; Howard 2020).

The dissemination of false information was not only used to win elections, some were just for pecuniary reasons. During the final months of the 2016 US presidential election the top 20 performing false news produced more engagement (reactions, shares and comments by

⁷ Information did not stop being mediated fully by editors and other traditional positions performed by humans. However, with the internet, after the arrival of social media and search engines, information became mostly mediated by algorithms.

⁸ Cambridge Analytica never had a relationship with the University and it was a subsidiary of SCL Group, a British corporation based in the United States, which was the mechanism that allowed them to bypass the US legal ban on foreign actors financing politicians in US elections. Furthermore, the company was founded by Robert Mercer and Steve Bannon, chief editor of Breitbart, an online right-wing media, and who worked for the Trump campaign.

social media users) on Facebook than the top 20 stories from major news outlets (Hughes and Waismel-Manor 2021; Silverman 2016a, 2016b). Most of these false stories came from an IP address in a small village called Veles in Macedonia. As reported by several media outlets a group of teenagers used the monetization capacity of Facebook to profit from spreading disinformation (Banic and Smith 2016; Oxenham 2019; Subramanian 2017). By creating profiles of alternative media, posting sensationalist news stories, these teenagers were able to “utilize the Internet for financial gain by creating sensational content fitting a pay-per-click world” (Hughes and Waismel-Manor 2021, 21).

The effects from fake news on social media has caused more than a disruption to the democratic processes. In December 2016 a man entered a pizza restaurant in Washington D.C. and starts shooting. The man was motivated by a conspiracy theory spread through social media that alleged a pedophile ring was operating in the pizzeria with the participation of high ranking members of the democratic party (Aisch, Huang, and Kang 2016). Furthermore, cases like this were not limited to western countries. In 2018 the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IIFMM), established by the United Nations Human Rights Council, reported that Facebook played a key role in spreading hate speech and misinformation that led to gross human rights violations and abuses committed against the Rohingya people (Human Rights Council 2018).⁹

As with almost every other social problem the Covid-19 pandemic deepened the concerns regarding fake news. The pandemic exposed the limitations and structural failures of national governments and international institutions to attend social needs and adequately communicate and implement safety measures. Furthermore, the policies adopted deepened political divisions that fueled confrontation between antagonistic political positions (Hartley and Vu 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic made the issue of how information is distributed on social media more relevant, as an information hungry society -facing uncertainties and anxieties- gulped any information that help them make sense of an overwhelming situation. The Covid-19 pandemic was the perfect analogy to describe the overwhelming spread of fake news in society, calling it a ‘fake news pandemic’ or an ‘infodemic’ (Carrion-Alvarez and Tijerina-Salina 2020; W. Ceron et al. 2021; Hartley and Vu 2020; Nielsen et al. 2020; Qrius 2018; Tagliabue, Galassi, and Mariani 2020). The ‘fake news pandemic’ added to the calls to regulate social media content.

4.2 Algorithms of dissemination

Part of the positive self-presentation image that social media platforms and tech companies produced is based on the technological/scientific ‘neutrality’ attributed to algorithms. As O’Neil points out, algorithms have been constructed around notions of impartial scientific development, that can eliminate human error; by ‘nullifying’ the possibility of human error algorithms are put into an almost deity position whose actions are almost unquestionable (O’Neil 2016).¹⁰

⁹ Rohingya refugees are currently suing Facebook for \$150 billion dollars over the lack of actions taken by the company in stopping anti anti-Rohingya hate speech (Culliford 2021).

¹⁰ A relatively new interdisciplinary academic field named Critical Data Studies (CDS), has focused on exploring the socio-cultural, legal, ethical, epistemological and political challenges of Big Data, data science and the digital infrastructure (See: Beer 2017; Gillespie 2010; Iliadis and Russo 2016; Richterich 2018; Thatcher, O’Sullivan, and Mahmoudi 2016).

In an oversimplified definition algorithms can be described as “a finite list of well-defined instructions for calculating a function, a step-by-step directive for processing or automatic reasoning that orders the machine to produce a certain output from given input” (Dijck 2013, 30). If we consider Google’s mission statement “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” (Google 1998). One might ask whom determines how information should be organized, and rank? under which categories? how they consider what information is useful, and what’s not? In the same sense, asking who and how instructions are given to algorithms is fundamental for understanding how social media platforms work, and how information is defined, presented and structured for users to see.

Algorithms and interfaces shape and condition not only what information appears, but how it can be accessed and processed by users (Schou and Farkas 2016, 36). As Schou and Farkas mention the technical network of the new media “platforms should not be approached as merely neutral tools, but rather as active agents in their own right [as] material environments” (Schou and Farkas 2016, 36), that shape our daily life, by determining what information we get and how. Furthermore, automatized decisions made by algorithms, such as those made by search engines, can “reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling racial stereotypes” (Noble 2018, 1). Therefore, in the critical spirit of post-structuralism, it is important to mention how these alleged ‘neutral’ technological developments function for disseminating information.

Advertising sales are at the heart of how media works in capitalist economies. As competition grew for the attention of viewers by the second half of the 20th century there was a ‘attention economy’ in which the attention of viewers/readers was the currency sold to advertisers. In this economy content was determined in accordance to the attention of viewers it could grab (See: Davenport and Beck 2001).

Traditional advertising is created to appeal to the masses, though audiences are divided according to categories (gender, age groups, race, power purchasing capabilities, etc.) they were targeted to large sociodemographic blocks. This advertising model came to be obsolete for the emerging social media platforms, as users were not prone to commercial activities (Dijck 2013, 40). In their early years, social media platforms had difficulties in figuring out ways on monetizing their growing number of users. Some of them avoided aggressive advertising strategies. Google founders, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, even suggested in an academic paper that search engines funded by advertising would naturally be biased in favor of advertisers, in detriment of consumer’s needs (Brin and Lawrence 1998).

It was not until the discovery of what Zuboff calls the *behavioral surplus* that social media platforms were able to generate huge advertising revenue (Zuboff 2019, 63–98). On its first few years Google’s profit came from two sources. The main one was for licensing deals that provided search and data services to other websites; the other, and much smaller, from sponsored ads that were linked to key words (Zuboff 2019, 71). Sponsored ads mainly consisted of key words links to specific ads, so if users searched for ‘cooking recipes’ advertisements of cook ware or supermarkets payed by a specific company would appear. Google was able to quantify the efficiency of the ads thanks to the ‘click-through’, that could track when the users clicked on the advertisement. Although it was more personalized, this advertising strategy followed the logic of traditional mass advertising of ‘guessing’ what a general section of the public would like.

At these time Google only used user’s data to upgrade and improve their services. Data and metadata generated by users was useful for improving the searching capacities of the

algorithms.¹¹ Yet by 2003 Google had new patents which would use all the information generated by users to deliver direct personalized advertisements; with this new algorithm Google could cross reference all data of the user (age, gender, place of residence, lifestyle, etc) -this data is known as UPI (User Profile information)- and could generate a specific ad for the user that would be auctioned to the highest bidder. So now if two different people searched for the same issue, ‘cooking recipes’, they would get different advertisement.

This generated a precision never seen before in advertising. As Google’s scientists could generate ads according to user behavior, they were no longer guessing what people would like, but were generating personalized prediction based on the own users UPI. This is the *behavioral surplus*, the behavioral data of users that previously was mainly used to improve services, is now the main material for the functioning of online advertising (Zuboff 2019, 81). Thus, the more UPI is obtained, the better the prediction systems, for this reason Google expanded the free services it provides beyond the search engine (Google translate, Gmail, Drive, Calendar, Youtube, Maps, etc). Google was able to transform what once was the collateral data, almost ‘waste data’, generated by users into the raw material that feeds the machinery of advertisement.¹²

In summary, Google extracts the raw data produced by users and processes it, to generate predictions of user behavior, these predictions are sold to the highest bidder through an auction. Zuboff calls this process and practice ‘*surveillance capitalism*’; which is based on an ‘*extraction imperative*’. As extracting the data from users is fundamental for this process, hence the more users spend time in the platforms, the more information can be obtained, and the more precise personalizes advertising can get (Zuboff 2019, 87). Therefore, the content showed in social media must engage the users to view more, and for longer periods of time. Algorithms are in a constant feedback loop that goes from user and platform, collecting and analyzing data. “As long as the user is present, the algorithm’s job is never quite finished” (Schou and Farkas 2016, 41).

Thou Google started the *behavioral surplus* and the *extraction imperative*, other online companies followed. Facebook had difficulties to find these mechanisms, but in its quest to emulate Google it succeeded. As the work of Skeggs and Yuill demonstrates Facebooks algorithms, under the logic of data collection and monetization of advertising, curate information and pre-selecting content available to users according to the users net worth and purchasing capabilities (See: Skeggs and Yuill 2016a, 2016b). Algorithms do not function simply as transmitters, in which information being inputted by a user is outputted to other users, algorithms are more than that they are “entangled in the modulation and presentation of this information. It is in this precise sense, as *mediators* rather than *intermediaries*” (Schou and Farkas 2016, 42). Therefore, “social media platforms do not merely transmit content, but filter it on the basis of claiming to augment it, thereby making the content more relevant to its potential consumers” (O’Callaghan et al. 2015, 406).¹³

This extraction logic (also known as data mining) created a race among digital and social media companies to acquire other platforms, so if users change platforms, they would always be available for data extraction and content selection. Google bought Youtube in 2006; and

¹¹ Data refers to any type of information -this might be image, text, sound, numbers, and/or personal information, such as name, date of birth, gender, level of education nationality and/or zip code. Metadata “contain structured information to describe, explain, and locate information resources or otherwise make it easier to retrieve, use, or manage them”(Dijck 2013, 30–31).

¹² Four years after discovering *behavioral surplus* Google’s revenue had increase more than 3,500 percent (Zuboff 2019, 87).

¹³ For research on algorithms, monetization and content filtration see: (Bucher 2012; Langlois and Elmer 2013)

Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion in 2012, and Whatsapp, with its more than 450 million users at the time for \$19 billion in 2014 (Covert 2014; Moore and Tambini 2018; Rusli 2012; Zuboff 2019, 103). This has meant that tech and digital companies have gained unprecedented levels of power and wealth over the last decade. Never in human history have so few entities, mainly five companies- Apple, Alphabet (Google's parent company), Meta (Facebook's parent company), Microsoft and Amazon- had access to so much information of billions of people.

The extractivist race for data the oligopolistic competition between the big social media platforms had a huge drawback: user's privacy. Although the issues of user's privacy and surveillance go beyond the scope of this research it is important to mention some fundamental points. First, that regulation or prohibition of the data extraction logic would seriously damage the money-making machinery of social media platforms. Both Google and Facebook are constantly lobbying to block any attempt to regulate data extraction (Brodkin 2017; Chen 2021; Zuboff 2019, 105). Secondly, social media companies determine the conditions of what is constituted as public and private information, although there are 'terms of reference' and there have been initiatives to regulate what information the platforms may or may not collect and publish, ultimately, the ones that dictate the terms and conditions are the online and social media companies (Howard 2015; R. F. Jørgensen 2019; Zuboff 2019, 90).

5 Text analysis

This chapter describes how the analyzed texts build a threat around the identified themes, it then looks into how different actors are identified and described, and what policy or extraordinary measures are proposed.

5.1 Social polarization

One of the central aspects around which the discourse of security and disinformation has been constructed is social polarization. In the texts that were analyzed the dissemination of false information through social media has been linked with fostering social polarization, eroding faith in democracy, and diminishing trust in fellow citizens and traditional institutions. One text mentions that disinformation breaks up the ‘contract of sincerity’ between the citizenship and politicians (Hartig et al. 2020, 7).

Regardless of where the texts locate its study, they continually point out that there is a social division, political polarization and a crisis of trust in institutions. Be that in the US (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021; Center for an Informed Public et al. 2021), European Union (Neudert et al. 2019), or Latin America (Hartig et al. 2020) words like animosity, polarization and/or tensions are used in the texts to highlight an ongoing context of political division which is linked to the use of social media as a new means of political communications, and to the dissemination of false information through it.

The texts mention that polarization, fueled by social media, manifests itself in various ways, and occurs in a correlational manner between effects and causes, meaning that is not for a single reason and in a linear way (cause-effect), but from the relationship of several factors. In this sense, polarization and the erosion in the trust in democracy, especially distrust to institutions and a disregard to democratic norms, are described as both a cause by social media disinformation and also the effect of social media.

“The social media-infused affective polarization that taints U.S. politics has contributed to erosion of this foundational democratic norm.” (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021, 17).

“as social media has helped exacerbate partisan hatred, the asymmetry of political polarization in the U.S. has grown even more acute.” (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021, 15).

Trust is a word constantly repeated in all text that were analyzed. Specifically trust is used to refer to a ‘institutional democratic crisis’ (Hartig et al. 2020); or as “the erosion of trust in democratic norms” and fellow citizens (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021, 5); or as a “declining trust” in elections (Center for an Informed Public et al. 2021, 241). Although the texts do not say it very explicitly, much less elaborate on what is out to be understood by trust or how it out to be measured, the reports link trust to an essential element for democracy and that its absence is a cause of threat to the functioning of a democratic society. Therefore, as misinformation is described as affecting the trust in democratic institutions, it is constructed as a threat, and trust in institutions something as the referent object of that threat.

Content labeled as misinformation or disinformation is linked to fostering the erosion of trust by spreading highly emotional content. The texts mention that disinformation narratives spread through social media are highly emotional or affective. What is identified as

misinformation, disinformation or fake news is labeled in the texts as ‘emotionally charged’ or ‘emotionally resonant’ and a cause of polarization.

“the dissemination of partisan and emotionally-charged content” (Neudert et al. 2019, 15)

“Similarly, a successful conspiracy theory is one whose narrative is especially compelling and emotionally resonant—the audience itself is made to feel that they are the protagonists in a story that only they can interpret and understand” (Center for an Informed Public et al. 2021, 48).

Though the texts do not give much detailed of what are to be considered truthful information or what constitutes the opposite of false information they do labeled misinformation as that which has a style that uses “emotionally driven language with emotive expressions” (Marchal et al. 2018, 5).

The creation of highly emotional content is linked to the way content is distributed on social media. The analyzed texts indicate that the content with the greatest emotional charge tends to be the one that becomes more viral, creating more engagement with social media users and makes users use more time the social media platforms. Furthermore, two forms are mentioned on how content distribution, by algorithms, in social media drives polarization, the ‘rabbit hole’ and the ‘information bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers. They both refer to how algorithms provide recommendations of content based on previous viewing history and content similarity making users only see and listen to “one side of the story and develop animosity toward anyone who believes the other side” (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021, 9). The ‘rabbit hole’ effect tends to be linked to how YouTube provides video recommendations on similar topics, alluring users to a almost limitless amount of content that reinforces their view on one issue. Similarity, the ‘information bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers’ is linked to how Facebook creates a bubble or chamber in which a user is only exposed to that content that already aligns with his political views (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021; Center for an Informed Public et al. 2021, 240).

A central theme in the texts refers to those who disseminate and produce information that is considered false, especially those who do so with intent. In this regard, established media outlets, elected politicians, and interest groups are pointed out as contributing to the production and dissemination of false information. Yet there is a special emphasis on foreign actors, especially countries influencing democratic process (APC 2021).

5.2 Freedom of expression

The texts mention disinformation in social media as affecting freedom of expression; as it can cause confusion and impacts “on the level of trust in the public sphere as a space for democratic deliberation” (APC 2021, 6).

Furthermore, the measures taken by some states and social media platforms are identified as a threat to freedom of expression, specially to journalist (Ireton, Posetti, and UNESCO 2018).. The text mention the legitimate concern of states worldwide about misinformation, but point out that this concerns are being used to pass legislation and policies that deepen the states control over internet and limit free speech (APC 2021, 14). The policies and law trying to address the ‘legitimate threat of misinformation’ “give discretionary powers to executive bodies to decide whether a piece of content is false or misleading, and give these bodies the power to issue fines, corrections or even hand out prison sentences for creating, publishing or disseminating pieces of content” (APC 2021, 14).

Moreover, the reports point out that “current content moderation practices allow social media companies to wield significant power over people’s right to freedom of expression” (Article 19 2021b). Social media platforms are designated as the contemporary gatekeepers, whose terms of service and/or community standards regulate what and who is allowed to express themselves in their spaces through content moderation. The reports identify that this is problematic as in many cases they fail to comply with standards of due process and/or unduly limit access to content (Article 19 2021a). Furthermore, it is pointed out that social media platforms heavily depend on technological solutions, based on algorithms developments that are unable to grasp and read the nuances of human speech, and that are not able to work in all human languages, therefore discriminating minority groups (APC 2021; Article 19 2021a). Regarding these issue the texts refer to the need of also legislating data protection laws to avoid users being deterred from exercising their right to free speech (APC 2021, 28).

Something very particular is presented here, since it is not that fake news threatens free speech, but that the regulation of content in social media threatens freedom of expression, that is, the proposed solution (regulation of misinformation) can become a threat and creates another referent object (free speech). Furthermore, it allows us to identify an internal conflict or contradiction between two elements of the security discourse. On one part the call for adopting policies and passing law for regulating content in social media. And on the other the threat of the use of such polices and laws to limit freedom of expression. The analyzed texts mention this conflict not as such or as a tension between two elements; but as two threats with different referent objects, one from disinformation that threats trust in democratic institution and fosters social polarization, and the other from the use of regulation as a mechanism that limits freedom of expression.

5.3 Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to reports, declarations and reports that mention the threat posed by misinformation on social networks. The texts indicate that there was already a problem with disinformation, propaganda disguised as information, conspiracy theories, and fake news on social networks. However, the pandemic exacerbated this, as:

“the uncertainty and confusion created by the pandemic provided new steam for the rapid spread of false or misleading information, which undermined efforts by governments and public health authorities to contain the transmission of the virus and provide adequate treatment” (Amnesty International 2021, 6).

Reports indicate that the pandemic allowed political interest groups, such as the anti-vaccine movement, to spread of false information and gain more attention and momentum. Misinformation has been linked to the increased risk of the virus, and consequences are attributed to disinformation campaigns, such as people not adopting the recommended health measures or taking measures that pose a risk to their health (Amnesty International 2021, 24).

Similarly as with social polarization, when referring to Covid-19 and misinformation, the texts link the phenomena to a lack of trust in health institutions, especially around the pharmaceutical industry (Virality Project 2022). Furthermore, the lack of ‘authorized’ governmental sources of information, along with punitive measures criminalizing misinformation, it is described as contributing to a “mistrust in the authorities at a time when trust and cooperation are essential to encourage people to follow public health guidance” (Amnesty International 2021, 24).

5.4 Role of actors and policy measures or extraordinary measures proposed

Though all of the texts mention the importance and obligation of government, social media companies and civil society to protect democracy, it is not explicitly mentioned what is meant by democracy or how it is defined. But the argument of eroding trust in norms and institutions tells us that there is a notion of a broken or in danger *status quo*. In this sense, the texts recommend that each actor take measures to counteract the threat.

Social media companies.

Social media platforms are described as catalysts of a social polarization that precedes their existence or for which they are not entirely responsible.

“[social media] are not the original or main cause of rising U.S. political polarization, a phenomenon that long predates the social media industry. But use of those platforms intensifies divisiveness and thus contributes to its corrosive consequences” (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021, 3).

Though social media companies do have publicly acknowledge that they have a role to play in solving the problem, and have taken steps on their own to do so (Sunstein 2018). Social media companies, especially Facebook, have taken measures such as developing algorithms to detect false information during special periods such as elections, or hiring people to review possible conflicting content. Yet, the texts point out that these measures are insufficient and demand more actions.

One central demand towards platforms, made in the texts, is regarding transparency. Social media companies are described as being secretive and rarely providing data on misinformation to academic institutions, scholars, or civil society (Pasquetto, Swire-Thompson, and Amazeen 2020). The demands for transparency center around disclosing data generated by social media companies, how algorithms work to detect and remove content and how they can promote polarizing content and false information. Content removal policies on social networks have been accused of political bias and fosters polarization (Barrett and Sims 2021). More transparency is described as “the only way to counter suspicions that such measures are designed to manipulate politics or otherwise exert illegitimate influence.” (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021, 25). Moreover, transparency “would illuminate the processes and mechanisms through which emotional misinformation is encountered, spread, and believed” (Pasquetto, Swire-Thompson, and Amazeen 2020, 5).

Government

The government is identified as the main actor responsible in taking measures to address the threat of disinformation in social media. Various proposals and recommendations are given such as: laws that oblige platforms to make their data transparent (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021; Center for an Informed Public et al. 2021); improve the control and supervision powers of autonomous government agencies to supervise the operation of the platforms (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021; Center for an Informed Public et al. 2021); increase the official and authorized online and traditional channels where information can be disseminated; it’s even propose the creation of alternative models of social platforms, such as public social media similar to public radio, or economic models in which economic incentives do not drive content production and user engagement (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims 2021).

Academics and OSC

Civil society and academics are pointed out as actors that can collaborate and help governments and social media companies in their efforts. They are described as Impartial actors who can mediate between profit driven social media companies and government limitations. However, his role is not indicated as central.

6 Conclusion

The security discourse around information in social media is centered around the construction of a threat to trust, whether trust of individuals with institutions, of individuals with political norms or between individuals in a society. In these senses, we can say that the security discourse of the selected non-state actors seeks to maintain or protect a hegemonic discourse, since it seeks to recompose a *status quo* that is described as being in danger. Moreover, the *status quo*, that is considered at threat, is seen as unproblematic. The *status quo* is equated with truth and rational. As Farkas and Schou mention in their analysis of contemporary post-truth narratives, there is a narrative of a particular understanding of democracy that “equate the idea of democracy with the ideas of reason, rationality and truth in an a priori fashion [which] remains an unquestioned assumption” (Farkas and Schou 2019, 2). As false information and emotion are discursively constructed as threatening democracy, in the texts analyzed democracy, truth and reason are chained as equivalent.

Furthermore, we can follow Stengel when he mentions that securitization does not necessarily involve the transformation of a security regime, that is the transformation of the hegemonic discourse in which as security policy is articulated, but it can take place inside a given security order, as part of an existing hegemonic project (Stengel 2019, 300).

In this sense, the security discourse analysed is just part of a hegemonic discourse that has been re-articulated from the pessimistic and optimistic view. The security discourse around social media content falls within the pessimistic and the optimistic vision described. As it seeks to protect the democratizing ‘virtues’ that are attributed to social networks, at the same time that it seeks to prevent the damage that these very structures can cause. The analysis shows that in the discourse there is a tension between the regulation of fake news and restricting freedom of expression, which defines the border between what is considered as valid, truthful expression and what should be restricted.

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