

NARRATIVES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ITALY FROM THE «INVISIBLE ENEMY» TO THE «HEALTH DICTATORSHIP»

NARRATIVA DE LA PANDEMIA DEL COVID-19 EN ITALIA DEL «ENEMIGO INVISIBLE» A LA «DICTADURA SANITARIA»

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the connections between the variables and problematic objects involved in the media narrative of health risks, since narratives are also the means by which both the individual and the community are moved to action. With this in mind, the following questions will be addressed: What happens to the narrative of a social problem such as a pandemic? What happened to the COVID-19 pandemic narrative in Italy? The attempt to answer these questions will be presented through the analysis of the narratives produced by the Italian daily press in the initial phase of the pandemic and the narratives of the social platform Twitter (now X), which will show how the dominant interpretative framing was articulated between the construction of an «invisible enemy» and a «health dictatorship».

KEYWORDS

Narrative, COVID-19 Pandemic, Newspapers, Twitter, Invisible Enemy, Health Dictatorship.

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RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es explicitar las conexiones entre las variables y los objetos problemáticos implicados en la narrativa mediática del riesgo para la salud, ya que las narrativas son también el medio de empujar tanto al individuo como a la comunidad a la acción. Teniendo en cuenta esta afirmación, las preguntas a las que se intentará dar respuesta son: ¿Qué ocurre con la narrativa de un problema social como una pandemia? ¿Y qué ocurrió con la narrativa de la pandemia COVID-19 en Italia? El intento se presentará a través del análisis de la narrativa producida por la prensa diaria italiana en la fase inicial de la pandemia y la narrativa de la plataforma social Twitter (ahora X), que mostrará cómo el encuadre interpretativo predominante se articuló entre la construcción de un «enemigo invisible» y la «dictadura sanitaria».

PALABRAS CLAVE

Narrativa, pandemia de COVID-19, prensa, Twitter, enemigo invisible, dictadura sanitaria.

INTRODUCTION

On 8 December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported the first case of a patient infected with a new virus similar to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) which had spread in late 2002 and early 2003. This was the first major global threat of an epidemic nature to the Western world in the 21st century. A threat whose dynamics led to the coining of the term infodemic (Rothkopf, 2003), which came back into fashion with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Nguyen, 2020; Boccia Artieri, 2023), clearly demonstrating how this phenomenon contributes to the construction of different social realities with the result of producing a further fragmentation of the world (Geertz, 2001). By using disinformation and focusing on a packaged block of fake news and «targets» to be erased, the main goal of infodemics is to influence public opinion by directing it towards sentiments and actions that serve its own purpose (e.g. generating panic, changing opinion on a given situation or candidate, etc.). These tactics evidently undermine democracy, stripping it of its meaning and transforming it into simple demagoguery based on the ad hoc construction of «filter bubbles» (Parisier, 2011) to polarise and ideologise opinion, as happened all over the world during the pandemic and in Italy (the first country to be seriously affected in Europe and perhaps even in the world).

Given this very brief premise, to be able to explain and understand socio-cultural phenomena, it is necessary to search for a foundation in the relationship between knowledge and social life within which the former is embedded. The search for a basis in the relationship between knowledge and social life includes a few critical junctures. For example, many social phenomena are considered social problems, and a myriad of phenomena fall into the latter category. In addition to this, there is the difficulty in agreeing on the terminology to be used (what the terminology «social problem» indicates and includes). This is further reinforced when considering the «culture variable», referring back to cultural relativism, which, besides being a concept of the anthropological and sociological sciences, is a principle of method according to which, in order to escape ethnocentrism, the study of a phenomenon must be approached by recognising the fact that each culture has its own validity and coherence and cannot be judged on the basis of the criteria prevailing in its own culture of reference.

If, however, the search for a foundation or foundations includes critical points, this is also because the narrative constructs them in this way. Therefore, these critical points cannot be left out. The questions we try to answer in this paper are: What happens to the narrative of a pandemic? What happened to the narration of the COVID-19 pandemic in a context that was characterised as particular, from the outset, as Italy?

While it is true that the narrative inherently has a very high degree of rhetoric (Hallsby, 2022) – accentuated by the forms of communication used – it also

encourages debate but not on all the issues regarding the pandemic and not in all places. In the case of the «pandemic», the narrative was globally mobilised but received local appropriation: «The globalization of communication has not eliminated the localized character of appropriation but rather has created a new kind of symbolic axis in the modern world», claimed Thompson (1995, p. 174).

Narrative comes in two forms (Czarniawska, 2004; Mangone, 2022): a) as a mode of knowledge, since the «cognitive» process does not consist of the purely mechanical recording of information, but it reorganises, reworks, represents and interprets knowledge. It is the result of an active process of construction; b) as a mode of communication, since it develops a system of symbols and meanings shared by a community or a certain part of it that thinks and acts on the basis of these symbols and meanings. Since knowledge allows for the development of systems of ideas and communication, it is easy to understand how a narrative assumes a central role in promoting social change in any society and with respect to any phenomenon being analysed.

I. NARRATIVES, REALITY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

In the light of these few introductory elements, it was natural for the media (without distinction) to produce information on the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that was, at best, sensationalist or, at worst, infodemic. At first, they blamed the Chinese and then those considered to be «anointers» (Villa *et al.*, 2020), attributing to them the stigma well defined by Goffman (1968) and then moving on to conspiracy theories (Gualda *et al.*, 2021; Douglas, 2021). This brings us back to thinking about the narrative, which, in a situation of high involvement of emotions, values and socio-cultural resources, must function in such a way that it does not cause moral panic (Cohen, 2002), but tends to modify attitudes and useful lifestyles (in this case, to reduce the risk of contagion).

The media narrative also reflexively became the narrative of the pandemic of individuals, outlining a scenario that took on the nature of a veritable clash, referring back to the semantic and metaphorical sphere of the enemy to be fought and of war (Martinez-Brawley y Gualda, 2020; Mangone, 2020). As Ricœur (1984) makes clear, the metaphor is a *mimesis*, i.e. the imitation of an action (metaphor of reality) and, in this case, concerns the narrative function of integrating the information acquired from the external world by transforming it into the world of the text or the verb through the composition of different and multiple events. The way in which the media filter the news, the way in which they express it, the images they use and, finally, the framework they propose for describing and interpreting events, are all factors that contribute to the spread of prejudices and stereotypes in public opinion, which at times and in certain situations are translated into moral panic. This highlights the complex role that

narratives and, in the case of social media, micro-narratives play in reducing or increasing the sense of insecurity in the community.

The understanding of narratives as a social practice (De Fina y Georgakopoulou, 2008), always implies a great deal of attention to the different levels of analysis that starts from the local level of interaction (community) as the place of articulation of phenomena that, however, can find their explanation and understanding beyond it. The media cannot be considered simply as 'neutral messengers' of information, since they now play an active role in the construction, identification and selection of social problems and risks insofar as they attribute a value-based meaning to what is transmitted. It is therefore no coincidence that especially in the English-speaking world we have witnessed the emergence of that specialised branch of communication called *risk communication* (Palenchar, 2005). However, it is not only the communication of risk (Cubeddu y Mangone, 2024) and those *framing effects* (Iyengar y Kinder, 1987) that are often unwanted or in any case unforeseen that can create further crisis situations to be managed. These dynamics are accompanied by further aspects relating to the changes in the forms and means of communication: a) the sources of information, which once consisted only of the individuals with whom we had face-to-face contact, have multiplied in contemporary society. The source is no longer just the set of individuals with whom we interact and have a symbolic exchange, but all those tools (old and new media) that can generate a symbolic exchange; b) there is a continuous flow of information that is always available, especially with the Internet, provided we have a connection.

Transformations in the forms of communication and the way information is accessed have also had consequences on the way individuals construct their own social reality. It is predominantly through media narratives that individuals can construct their own idea of the world by understanding their surroundings. It is also through them how individuals construct their identity and design their life biography by making choices.

Before presenting some of the aspects that characterised the narratives of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Italy, it is necessary, albeit not exhaustively, to outline the theoretical framework underlying the relationship between narrative and the ability of individuals to construct an idea around their surroundings (social reality) and which, as a consequence, then becomes the impetus for action (Mangone, 2022). This is because the multidimensionality and multiplicity of factors that influence the attitudes and actions of individuals mean that the concept of social reality presents a high degree of subjectivity. This is also in light of the dynamics of its construction. These dynamics allow individuals to continually create and transform social reality through the actions and interactions they experience together as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful. The latter, therefore, is not «constitutive», but rather a «quality» that belongs to phenomena that

individuals recognise as independent of their will (Berger y Luckmann, 1966) and deriving from the historical forms with which they relate the social system and the world of life (*Lebenswelt*). Each individual represents «the world» differently on the basis of their individual daily life experience and socially derived knowledge, which becomes socially approved knowledge as «it becomes an element of the relatively natural concept of the world», because it is recognised and accepted not only by those who possess it but also by others, and this «although the source of such knowledge remains entirely hidden in its anonymity» (Schütz, 1946, p. 478). Social reality not only includes the social meaning attributed to certain situations, but also the meanings produced by the subjective world of individuals.

Reality is, therefore, a socially constructed system according to a certain order and sequence of events that organise both subjective elements (the signifying reality of individuals) and objective elements (social or institutional order) as a product of the everyday living of human beings (Wallace y Wolf, 1980). The social reality that individuals construct with their everyday activities through the process of socialisation leads, through narration, to a dialectical and dialogical process (Ricoeur, 1986) between the individual within the social world (*idem*) and the singularity of the individual (*ipse*) that allows individuals not to be influenced by reality for what it is, but for what individuals believe it to be. The same situation experienced by individuals in different cultures may or may not be defined as a social problem based on the interpretation of culture (Geertz, 1977). Some scholars associate the identification and/or creation of a social problem with what Griswold calls the cultural object, i.e. «shared significance embodied in form. In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated. [...] Notice that the status of the cultural object results from an analytic decision that we make as observers; it is not built into the object itself» (1994, p. 11). This definition, however clear it may be, is flawed in that the «products» differ according to the source of production, and, in this regard, Sahlins (1985) had made it clear how the creation of cultural objects is the result of a process of interpretation involving different actors and, therefore, different sources of production. These interpretations differ in content and meaning depending on the sphere of reference of the individuals (public and/or private) and the socio-cultural system due to the presence of experiences and biographies of the members of the community that differ from one another (Hannerz, 1996). This leads to considering society as a kind of «arena of confrontation» in which there is a competition between situations that can be defined as social problems (Hilgartner y Bosk, 1988) to define a hierarchical scale.

Narratives play more than one function within this «arena of confrontation». In the construction of the hierarchical scale of social problems, they tend to overexpose certain facts (or social events) compared to their real scope by distorting reality. At the same time, they can reduce social distances since they modify the

map of spatial relations (Meyrowitz, 1985). The way human beings perceive the world combines problems relating to the world itself (external reality independent of the individual) and the individual perceiving this world by acquiring primary information. The relationship between how individuals think about social reality and how they perceive it is a complex process of interaction in which narration is a form of the objectification of human expressiveness and symbolic mediation. Individuals do not always have a direct and immediate experience of the events that flow continuously. Most of the time, it is an indirect experience derived from the media that have the capacity to represent «slices of reality» contributing to the formation of ideas and images that are often typified because they are based on a selection of events that are transformed into news, so-called *newsmaking* (Hess, 2008). However, it is equally true that, in this flow, there are events (and social problems) that claim their uniqueness and a prominent position.

2. THE PANDEMIC IN ITALY BETWEEN THE METAPHOR OF THE «INVISIBLE ENEMY» AND THE «HEALTH DICTATORSHIP»

The reality that emerged in the first months of the spread of the virus in Europe and in particular in Italy (for the reason explained above) suggested that in the actions of governments (Palamara, 2020) and individuals there was no clear awareness of the problem in the terms of the pandemic emergency and the health risk (Mangone, 2021a, 2021b) that entire populations were about to run (and in fact did run). Only after the first cases in Europe, is the strong need to address the problem decisively confirmed by orienting communication and forms of narratives to the containment of the contagion to defeat the virus (the fight against the «invisible enemy»), only to go in the opposite direction once the vaccination campaign was launched (the so-called «health dictatorship» phase).

Therefore, this paper will try to answer the questions asked in the introduction: What happens to the narrative of a pandemic? What happened to the narrative of the pandemic from COVID-19 in a context that was characterized as particular, from the very beginning, as Italy?

2.1. BRIEF METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The research used to support the theoretical considerations presented consists of two segments, each refers to the two phases into which the pandemic has been classified in Italy. The first segment refers in particular to the period of the pandemic that has been identified in Italy as Phase 1 (21 February - 3 May 2020), corresponding to the identification of the first infected person until the day when the first wave of the pandemic ended. The second segment also refers to the period following Phase 1, which has been identified as Phase 2 and which includes the political measures for the final exit from the emergency and the vaccination campaign.

The first of the two segments of the empirical research is based on the analysis of Italian newspapers that are representative both national territory and the different political orientations (*Corriere del Mezzogiorno edizione della Campania, Corriere della Sera, il Fatto Quotidiano, il manifesto, Il Sole 24 Ore, L'Osservatore Romano, la Repubblica, e Libero*). The time frame is the so-called Phase 1 (February 21-May 3, 2020), that includes the day of the detection of the first infected person to the day when the true first lockdown ends (Mangone, 2021a). The focus in this period is placed exclusively on the health aspects.

The second research segment regards the narrative of the pandemic through the social platform Twitter and is primarily based on the analysis of tweets. The data analysed were extracted with the help of the R academic Twitter system software, API2 (Barrie y Ho, 2021) with academic access, via twarc2, in Python2. twarc2 is a command-line tool and Python library that allows Twitter data to be collected and stored via its API.

The data were extracted from a collection that is related to a larger study on conspiracy theories that circulated during the pandemic, the project PID2021-123983OB-I00: «Teorías de la conspiración y discurso de odio en línea: comparación de patrones en narrativas y redes sociales sobre COVID-19, inmigrantes, refugiados y personas LGTBI», funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ and by «FEDER/UE» (Universidad de Huelva, Spain). This article make use of two collections of data belonging to the NON-CONSPIRAHATE! Project: *Conspiracy Theories Dataset, 2020-2023* [multilingual] (Gualda, 2024) and *COVID-19 and Conspiracy Theories in Italy, 2020-2022* (Mangone, 2023)¹. For the elaboration of this article, we filtered all the tweets containing the following tokens, connected to antivaccine movement in the context of COVID-19: «vaccino», «#vaccino», «#novaccino», «#novax», «#greenpass», «#obbligovaccinale». We called this subsample: *Antivaccine Movement in Italy Dataset, 2020-2023*. This subsample comprises a total of 482,333 tweets (without retweets) and as a period includes both Phase 1 (emergency) and Phase 2 (the vaccine campaign) of the pandemic in Italy. Both analysis segments (related to newspapers and the social platform Twitter) have their theoretical bases in the concept of narratives discussed in the previous paragraph.

2.2. THE «INVISIBLE ENEMY», THE NARRATIVE OF ITALIAN NEWSPAPERS IN PHASE 1 OF THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic emergency in Italy appeared as an expression of a problem of social order and control (Martini, Picarella y Mangone, 2022). It was also the testimony of a dramatic human condition experienced by both health workers

¹ I was able to benefit from this data as a member of the International Team Work of this project representing Italy [<https://eseis.es/investigacion/discursos-de-odio>].

and the population (obviously in a differentiated manner), which, once included in the media circuit, may have the capacity to arouse emotional reactions in public opinion, but at the same time, may draw attention to issues of more general interest (e.g., public health, community, responsibility, etc.). The scenario that emerged during this period took on the characteristics of a veritable confrontation. Most of the words used, both in the headlines and in the texts of the articles, refer to the semantic and metaphorical sphere of the enemy and, therefore, of a war to be fought (war, enemy, fighting, heroes, army, front line, etc.).

Figure 1 - *il Fatto Quotidiano*, February 23, 2020 [Virus, Northern Italy under siege], *la Repubblica*, March 13, 2020 [There is no respite], and *il manifesto*, March 18, 2020 [The siege]



[Source: Author's composition]

The emergency due to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was thus framed and interpreted in a twofold «frame». On the one hand, there was the daily narrative of the development, which referred to the issue of individual and

collective (public) health, not only in Italy but also in the world, to the virus that could affect everyone indiscriminately, and this generated a greater awareness in public opinion, while at the same time perceiving ourselves as at risk. On the other hand, the use of terms such as war, enemy, siege, ceasefire, etc. (Figure 1) helped to promote a key reading, even a very similar one among the newspapers, suggesting the idea that the emergency could be recognised as a «terrorist action», fuelling a climate of fear and insecurity and, more generally, a sense of distrust of others already present due to «conspiracy» (Gualda, 2024; Gualda y Rúas, 2019) and «conspiracy» theories fuelled by fake news (Orso *et al.*, 2020; Rocha *et al.*, 2023) that gave the virus built in a laboratory in Wuhan, China, the city in the Hubei Province from which it later spread.

The social representation of the emergency (Páez y Pérez, 2020) provided by the Italian newspapers, however, connected to a more general issue. It was one of uncertainty, which in this case may have contributed to accelerating a generalized sense of insecurity and alarm (Cohen, 2002) even to the point of widening the sociocultural distances between individuals who were all seen as «potential anointers». It is worth recalling the hate attacks on social media against runners. Looking neutrally at the nature of the emergency, it is evident how it is impossible to physically identify an «enemy» to fight. On the contrary, precisely because of its invisibility, it manifested itself pervasively and therefore everywhere and unperceivable (it could not even be contained outside the home, because it was directly brought into the home by the inhabitants themselves in a completely unconscious (if asymptomatic) way). The dual way in which the media and individuals «observed and narrated» the emergency, not neutrally but as a «participant observer», was influenced by the narrative that absorbed all the media, by the language chosen to construct and represent an event of unpredictable proportions, as well as by the keys to interpretation that were made available to public opinion, capable of reproducing stereotyped or over-generalised and generalised images.

The narrative revolved around the attribution of the label of «enemy» to something (in this case, the virus) invisible, recalling that aspect of social irrationality of the scapegoat (Girard, 1986). Any community in the grip of violence or oppressed by some disaster which it is incapable of remedying willingly throws itself into a blind hunt for the scapegoat (Girard, 1977). This was the narrative style that the media, in general, but individuals themselves adopted regarding the pandemic. In this kind of interpretive dynamic, there is an ambiguity that drives individuals to give irrational social explanations of their own attitudes.

The attribution (false, almost always) of blame to a person or group defined as an «enemy» is fully in line with this logic. The «potential anointers» mentioned above refer to aspects of the social pact on which the cohesion of

a community is based and the strategies adopted to defend it against internal and external enemies. The ritual procedures adopted are an indicator of the social and political structures of a community, and narratives have been the tool through which to construct the «invisible enemy» (Sowden, Borgstrom y Selman, 2021) to be fought: «Claiming to be bolstering safety yet feeding fear, politicians cite a vast threat from an invisible enemy. As in actual war, they deem collateral damage to be unfortunate but inevitable» (Tisdall, 2020). Crisis situations are primarily crises of the social and, therefore, we are driven to explain and interpret them through social causes as a war to be fought against an enemy. Normally, the enemies to be eliminated belong to categories that are particularly exposed to the risk of persecution, but in this case the enemy has no materiality and, nevertheless, the projection onto an «invisible enemy» of the aggression that develops from the social crisis allows for the reinforcement of collective representations, collective fears and frustrations find an outlet against a designated victim (the runner, the dog owner, the smoker who went out to buy cigarettes, etc.). The narratives constructed around the pandemic constituted those descriptive tools for understanding the processualism and mechanisms of the operating and construction of the category of the «invisible enemy» (Sowden, Borgstrom y Selman, 2021). The words, images, videos and whatever else was used for narrative influenced the construction of shared representations as they produced a symbolic mediation that provided identification models on which to base social interactions and actions.

Attempting to make a first synthesis of this research segment, which looked at the way the content of news articles is organised in individual Italian newspapers, a fixed narrative structure common to all newspapers has emerged, characterised by the presence of three main points: 1) the description of COVID-19 was not always in line with the «5W rule» (Lasswell, 1948); 2) the focus on reconstructing the dynamics of the actions and the roles of the «protagonists» (reconstruction of the profile of the individuals involved – the sick, doctors and health personnel, volunteers – and attention to the role of public authorities and political leaders); 3) importance given to the iconographic aspect (many newspapers used large photos in the centre of the front page), since images «enrich» the story by also suggesting the descriptive tones of the story (Colombo, 2018) both positively and negatively.

The case of the pandemic narrative has shown how concrete the ability of all narrative processes (especially those of the media) is to influence public opinion and thus the daily life choices of individuals. In other words, the words and images used by newspapers to narrate the pandemic not only produced a symbolism that contributed to the self-construction of identities but also provided identification models on which social interactions and actions in response to the emergency were based.

2.3. FROM «INVISIBLE ENEMY» TO «HEALTH DICTATORSHIP»: THE PROPAGANDA ACTION OF TWITTER

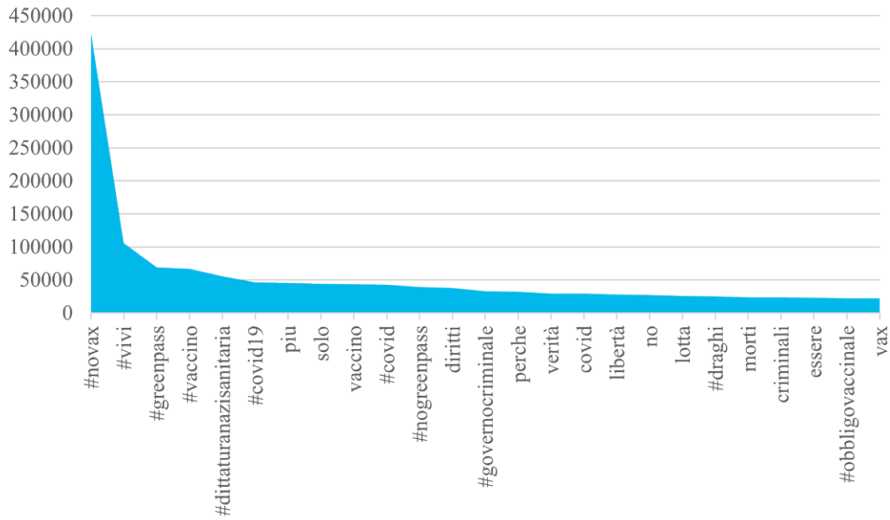
The previous section discussed the social representations of the pandemic in Italy related to Phase 1. The representations constructed by the mass media (in this case, the newspapers) highlighted the obsessive search for someone to accuse (the enemy) and to fight against creating a climate of persecutory violence as with the Chinese or with the runners in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. The enemy has no materiality and yet the projection of the aggression that developed out of the social crisis onto an «invisible enemy» allowed for the reinforcement of collective representations, collective fears and frustrations that found an outlet against a designated victim, the virus.

If this is what happened with the print media in the very first phase of the emergency (Phase 1), what happened with a social media such as Twitter (now X) requires a broader analysis in terms of time, which cannot be limited to the initial phase, but must also include the subsequent phases (Phase 1+Phase 2), as described in the brief methodological note.

Between Phase 1 and Phase 2, there was a general increase in tweets that had the coronavirus as their subject (Mangone, 2023), but the hashtag #novaccino (1,618) and its English-language variant #novax (423,224) became dominant as the vaccine campaign began and continued. This was accompanied by the construction of an anti-vaccine narrative that translated in Italy into a «conspiratorial» (Candini *et al.*, 2023) and «health dictatorship» (Garzonio y Nuvoli, 2022) narrative, determining two negative attitudes. On the one hand, the establishment of a conflict between those in favour of the vaccine and those against it. On the other, the assumption of attitudes not oriented to reducing the spread of the virus by putting at risk the health of others but also their own. In Italy, the spread of the virus was seen primarily as a threat to health, but for many it was also a threat to the freedom of everyone (from children to the elderly, no one was excluded), given the restrictions on movement imposed by confinement to the home. The world in this sense has seen the establishment of two positionings. On the one hand, those of the exclusive protection of health with the application of the «state of exception» in a strictly legal sense (Schmitt, 2005/1922; 2007) - see, for example, in Europe the blocking of the Schengen Treaty and, therefore, consequently the impossibility of free movement. While on the other, those who argued for an abuse in the use of the «state of exception» such as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who considered it a legal vacuum, a paradoxically legalized suspension of the law (Agamben, 2005/2003) - not a dictatorship but an *iustitium* (suspension of private rights). Agamben interpreted the pandemic crisis as a «branded» sign and is convinced that contemporary society believes only in «bare life» that does not unite men but separates them (Agamben, 2020a, 2020b) and in nothing more. One is willing, therefore, to sacrifice everything, including

individual and collective freedom. It is worth recalling that with the 2009 H1N1 pandemic (Patton, 2011), which had far more limited effects than the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, this theory was used to analyse the political response.

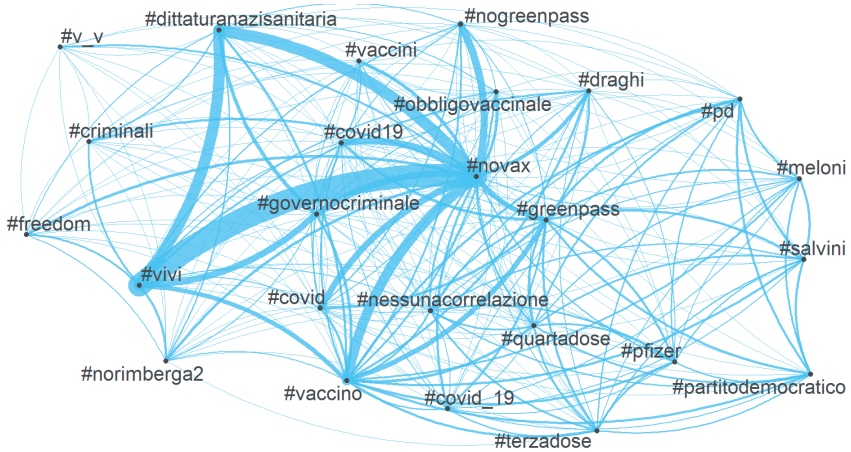
Graph 1 – Frequency of the first 25 tokens. *Antivaccine Movement in Italy Dataset, 2020-2023*



[Source: Author's elaboration]

An analysis of the occurrence of the tokens in the tweets reveals exactly what has been highlighted above, namely this contrast between the perception of the virus as a threat to health and at the same time as a threat to freedom. If we exclude from the first 25 tokens (Graph 1) conjunctions and monosyllables among the most frequent tokens, we find opposites (#novax - #vaccine, or #greenpass - #nogreenpass), to which we add #dittaturanazisanitaria. This situation, which was the de facto clash between pro- and anti-vaccine individuals, is even more evident when we look at the co-occurrences network (Graph 2). From the graph with the hashtag #novax in the centre, the link is obvious.

Graph 2 – Top 25 Hahstags Network. *Antivaccine Movement in Italy Dataset, 2020-2023*



[Source: Author's elaboration, with *quanteda.textplots* (R)]

If, on the other hand, we look at the top authors of the tweets in the same dataset, the record of tweets (now posts) is by a profile named «Erica» (@Erica43581765) with 10,305 tweets. This profile is still active, and its «anti-vaccine» positioning is still very evident (Photo 1).



Photo 1 – Post Dec. 6, 2024, by user Erica (@Erica43581765) [Source: Erica (2024)]

The post accompanied by a section of newspaper photos bearing a significant headline [Ema and Big Pharma now admit it: «Fatal myocarditis among young vaccinees»] carries the following post:

«SICURI ED EFFICACI.
 #BOVE #MIOCARDITE #MENTANA #ENRICOMENTANA
 #TGLA7 #VACCINO #RobertoSperanza #MarioDraghi #DRAGHI
 #morbillo #PD #PartitoDemocratico #EllySchlein #fabiofazio #xfactor
 #amici24 #Sinner #Fedez #Chiaraferragni #Ultimo #AngelinaMango
 #Elodie #Geolier #vascorossi» [Post]. X (ex Twitter). (Erica, 2024)

The overall picture evoked by the narratives created by users of the social platform Twitter during the pandemic – and still today – suggests a scenario in which the perception of a permanent state of tension is very strong and the effects of the narratives influence the perception of reality and of a social problem such as health risk, to the point of underestimating or denying it (see, for example, the hashtag #dictaturanazisanitaria). The spread of the virus was seen first and foremost as a threat to health, but also to personal freedom and choice, given the restrictions on movement and the issue of compulsory vaccination (#novax and #nogreenpass), to the point of speaking of a «health dictatorship». Undoubtedly, the Twitter narrative of the pandemic in Italy led to the spread of orientations that in many cases were based more on the belief in conspiracy theories and denialism than on actual health protection.

CONCLUSIONS

The cases that emerged from the two research strands highlighted how the social conditions in the context of, and even after, a period of emergency, such as the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, can foster unprecedented forms of conspiracy theories based on fake news, which in turn generate forms of conflict and hostility. The pandemic narrative of the Italian newspapers, with its metaphor of the «invisible enemy», and the narrative produced by Twitter users, which generated the conspiracy theory that fuelled anti-vaccine ideas, are concrete cases of how idea systems can reproduce themselves. In the case of the pandemic, this led to a drift towards denial and conspiracy, which in turn led to conflict between pro- and anti-vaccine individuals (with a climate of mistrust in science).

Wanting to make some general conclusions about what happens when a social problem is narrated (in this case the COVID-19 pandemic), if we apply Merton's two «mottos» to this condition «We do not know whether what we say is true, but it is at least significant», and «This is demonstrably so, but we cannot indicate its significance» (1949, p. 140) -, the narrative of the pandemic, as it was configured

both in the newspapers (old media) and on the social platform Twitter, now X (new media), is closer to the first of Merton's «mottos» than to the second. The narrative of the pandemic at the historical moment of its emergence was a pervasive theme. However, if the multiplicity of themes associated with the pandemic was so pervasive, and in many cases even conceptually ambiguous, it was also because the narrative itself constructed them in such a way, misrepresenting the phenomena to a significant degree both by the amount of coverage given to specific related events as well as by the unambiguity of the narrative frames. The pandemic narrative can be seen as a «distorting mirror» of social reality because it has chosen the typical culture of the social environment in which it has spread.

Synthesising the narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic, not only does the physical environment emerge so do digital ecosystems and cyberspace that offer users a wide range of information and news. They influence both the mode of production and the form of consumption of the same, because by altering the characteristics of the traditional space-time dimension, they generate a new communicative system based on cross-media or hypermedia, which refers to the use of media of various kinds that integrate different communicative levels and languages (filmic, iconic, textual). They generate a new communicative system based on *crossmediality* or *hypermediation*, which refers to the use different kinds of media that integrate different communicative levels and languages (filmic, iconic, textual, sound), as well as the immediacy of the news. It is the (immediate) response that the media try to offer to different audiences, transmitted in a way that allows the communicator to come into direct contact with public opinion (Mangone, 2021a). These two sets of issues contribute to the phenomena of moral panic: greater «proximity» to the narrated events corresponds to greater identification, which can turn into a perception of threat and danger to our own security. The case studies presented show once again how concrete narratives can influence public opinion and thus the everyday choices of individuals.

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