

Think twice before sharing.

The chemical attack on Douma on social media

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A papà.

*E se è vero che la prima vittima della guerra è la verità,
è un dovere combattere per la sua sopravvivenza.*

(Caputo, 2017)

*And if it is true that the first victim of war is the truth,
it is a duty to fight for its survival.*

(Caputo, 2017)

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However, this time there is only one person towards whom I feel immensely grateful: myself.

I came to London with a big hole in my heart, which I thought would never be full again. I lost my first and perhaps most important supporter, the one who always stimulated me to be the best version of myself. But I learnt that this is how life is made, and this is how life makes you stronger. Today, I have finally reached the point where I am the first and the most important supporter of myself. Now I know that no mountain is too high or no hole is too deep. And I will continue to set higher goals every time, because this is what strong and dreamer women do.

I will make you so proud of me that you will come back from wherever you are.

Abstract

This research examines the role of social media as source of information. Based on semi-structured interviews with four Italian war journalists, the project discusses advantages and disadvantages social media brought in the fruition of news. Major attention is given to the topics of disinformation, manipulation of the public opinion, fake news and possible development for the future. Build around the case study of the supposed chemical attack on the city of Douma (Syria) of the 7th of April 2018, a content analysis is conducted on the transcriptions of the interviews, in order to investigate the four main topics mentioned above. The results show how social media changed the consumption of information, allowing the spread of disinformation. The case study is of a great significance: news given as truthful went mainstream, revealing itself as a fake news subsequently. Two different resolution has been proposed, both emphasise the importance of the verification of the sources.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Importance of the Research

Internet had major impacts on modern life (Young and De Abreu, 2010, p. 267) and, for instance, it is possible to observe them along the fruition of news. Being that constantly more people access social media in order to gain information (Kim and Sin, 2010) regarding the diverse happenings in the world, such as current wars, crisis, sport news, it is fair to say that Internet, especially social media, are revolutionising the traditional media (Westerman et al., 2011) and the traditional way of doing journalism, changing the way in which media are produced, distributed and consumed (Newman, 2009). Nonetheless, the total knowledge concerning a specific topic is accessible at any person that can access the Web.

The easy access to a great deal of diverse information has shown to have a reverse of the medal: it is almost impossible to check the veracity and consistency of the news published online (Agichtein et al., 2008). This retro effect allows misinformation to prosper, complicating the possibility for the readers to check the sources of different news. In addition, social media are a great tool in order to manipulate the public opinion, mainly because they can reach a considerable public in seconds and drive the public opinion in any wanted direction (Holiday, 2012). How can a citizen recognise misleading news in order to gain a total understanding of a certain topic or event? This is the question the present research will answer.

The case study is located within the ongoing civil war in Syria, one of the most brutal and long wars of our time (Amnesty International, 2015), where many different factions are present on the soil (but not only) and are trying to gain the public support. The specific chemical attack, on the day of the writing (July 1, 2018), is characterised by the existing of two different versions of what happened. The first version, the regime version, deny any involvement of the governative forces for what concern the use of chemical weapons. The second one, the rebels version, which is also the mainstream and most shared version by the Occident (Micalessin, 2018), is accusing the regime of the death of dozens of people. Although an international agreement has not been reached yet, a counter-attack has been launched by the Western coalition, based on information gained through social media, as, for example, a video showing people in hospital after the supposed attack, most probably with intelligence information as well. It is very important that a research as such is done because public opinion should be aware of the happening of the world, basing their support or

disapproval on truthful information, distinguishing between real news and fake ones, particularly with regards of a delicate situation as a civil war.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1: Are social media manipulating the public opinion?

RQ2: What western media reported is different from what happened in Douma?

RQ3: How can a citizen be able to gain the truth via social media?

1.3 Research Aims

The research aims to investigate the relation between social media and disinformation in regards to the case study of the supposed chemical attack in the city of Douma (Syria) on the 7th of April 2018. More specifically, through a comparison of four Italian war journalists' views with the relevant literature, the project will outline the more salient aspects of the power of social media in shaping the public opinion (Chapter 4.2), through the changes social media brought into the journalistic profession (Chapter 4.1). Furthermore, the research will analyse the possible misinformation in regards to the chemical attack happened in the city of Douma on the 7th of April 2018 (Chapter 4.3). Further developments of the issue will be taken in consideration (Chapter 4.4).

1.4 Research Objectives

To achieve the research aims mentioned above, the project's objectives will be to analyse the relevant literature for what concern social media in their broad definition, the role of them as source of information, focusing on the public opinion manipulation made through misinformation and fake news shared on the social media. A brief explanation and contextualisation of the case study will be given. Secondly, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with four Italian war journalists investigating the four main topics the research aims to cover, which are as follow: social media and the fruition of news and information through them; manipulation of public opinion through social media and fake news; the chemical attack on the city of Douma on the 7th April 2018; possible future solutions in order to contrast the spreading of online disinformation. Thirdly, a content analysis on the transcriptions of the interviews will be conducted, giving major attention to the relevant elements which will match the aforementioned four research topics. Lastly, a comparison

of the relevant literature review with the analysis of the interviews' transcriptions will be done, in order to find similarities and differences.

1.5 Dissertation Organisation

The dissertation will begin with the literature review regarding the topics analysed along the research, which are social media and their relation with news and information, their possible links with public opinion manipulation and the spread of fake news. Furthermore, an analysis concerning the role of the journalist in reporting the war in a western country such as Italy will be done. Lastly, the literature chapter will end with a brief explanation of the Middle East situation in regards of the so-called 'Arab Spring', focusing on the Syrian civil war and the specific case of the supposed chemical attack on Douma of the 7th April of 2018.

The second part of the project will focus on the description of the theoretical background and the used methodology to gain and analyse the data. Subsequently, the reader will find the content analysis of the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews with the four Italian war journalists, embedded with the comparison of the findings with the relevant literature and the discussion of the results.

The last part of the project will be the investigation of possible solutions proposed by the participant in regards to the possibility to find the truth online.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 Social Media

The interest concerning the study of the relationship between the modern society and the modern ways of communications arose in many different fields of study (Slevin, 2016; Carr and Hayes, 2015; Castillo et al., 2013; Asuni & Farris, 2011; Westerman et al., 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2009). The composite term social media is the summary of the intensification of the aforementioned deep connection (Slevin, 2016). However, how to define social media is still a major challenge. In fact, a common and shared definition of social media does not exist (Effing, van Hillegersberg and Huibers, 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The reasons behind the lack of a unique and mutually agreed definition are mainly linked to the fact that any discipline addresses social media differently (Howard and Parks, 2012; Kent, 2010; Terry, 2009; Dean, 2002), presenting the limit of being not applicable outside the original field of study, making the definition not exhaustive, nullifying the aim of a shared understanding (Carr and Hayes, 2015; Hempel, 1966). Moreover, those definitions do not include any space for the future development of the field, missing the point of the fast and indisputable grown and change of the media throughout time (Carr and Hayes, 2015).

In order to build knowledge and advance in the field a good theory is indispensable, or better, it is fundamental in order to improve practice and further development (Van Osch and Coursari, 2015). The chosen definition has been developed and conceptualised by Carr and Hayes (2015), which describes social media as follow:

‘Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.’

(Carr and Hayes, 2015, p. 50)

The definition mentioned above has been chosen for its clarity and relevance. Social media are intended as Internet-based online tools, counterposed to Web-based one, precisely because the Web is not an essential component to allow the existence of social media. However, it can be present. Unlike a face to face communication, where at least one channel of communication have to be present in order to let the communication happen, for social media the channels are still in place even if a user, or a certain number of users, are not using them (Carr and Haryes, 2015).

Social platforms such as Facebook, for example, does not disappear because a person is not logged in his/her account: it exists constantly and it can be accessed 24/7 independently from the main user. This allowed the persistence of the social media services. For communication to happens, generally, interaction is fundamental. This changes drastically in regards to social media: the perception of interaction became the main element of social media. An example may be a young fan who, posting on his/her favourite singer wall on Facebook, has the perception of interacting with the singer at the moment he/her replies, or even only sends a 'like', to his/her post. However, it is highly possible that it has been the artist's team that replied to the young supporter. Nowadays, even a software can mimic real interactivity (Perse & Rubin, 1989). In so far, for a user it is enough to perceive the interaction, without knowing if the interaction happened for real or not. It is possible to recognise how the value of social media is not imposed from the top, from the power or from who is hosting the medium, because it is the interaction within the users that gives the value of social media (O'Sullivan, 2005). Lastly, social media are defined as mass personal communication, where users are involved simultaneously in mass and interpersonal communication (O'Sullivan, 2005).

Focusing on today's situation, social media have gained considerable attention and the new ways in which people are capable of interacting nowadays were just unthinkable a decade ago (Ngai et al., 2015; Colliander and Dahlén, 2011). Nevertheless, social media are not only about social interactions, but they have also allowed many organisational activities, the sharing of the information and knowledge, collaborative and learning activities and many more, becoming fundamental and indispensable for millions of users every day (Agichtein et al., 2008). In addition to having achieved considerable attention, social media have reached an incredible number of users. Social platform as Facebook or Youtube can count respectively 2.19 billions of monthly active users and 1.5 billion of monthly active users (Statista, 2018). Not only Facebook and Youtube are allowing social interactions, but it is possible to recognise a considerable number of social media platforms or applications (Stieglitz et al., 2014).

2.2 Social Media, Information, News

If at the beginning of their history social media were seen mainly linked with the purpose of socialisation and messaging, nowadays it has become a major source of news and information (Pepitone, 2010; Kim and Sin, 2015), drastically changing the way in which users send and receive

information (Westerman et al., 2011). This created a major challenge related to the difference between traditional information sources and social media as a source of information. Traditional media are structured in such a way for which gatekeepers¹ are in charge of choosing publication, with the main duty of checking the validity, veracity and importance of news in order to guarantee the credibility of the information (Salcito, 2009). Nowadays, we are witnessing how social media are gradually, however not too slowly, replacing the traditional media as a primary source where to find news and information, bringing on the scene clear advantages (Osatuyi, 2013). The information became dynamic, namely the possibility to create multiple conversations among the information arises (Osatuyi, 2013; Hocevar, 2014). The static article on newspaper seems ancient if compared with, for example, the possibility for news shared on Facebook to be commented by users, in real time, allowing discussions among users, gaining responses and reactions from the public opinion. Nevertheless, the audience can be targeted specifically and in a timely manner (Osatuyi, 2013). Today, a passionate about yoga, for example, can 'like' on Facebook potentially all the pages related to the argument, being informed, on a world scale, of any news, development, meeting, training, tools about yoga, in real time and without spending a penny, gaining knowledge on what is happening internationally in the field. Furthermore, the dissemination of the information through social media is fast, faster compared to the speed of traditional media, which usually have a long delay in publishing news and information, a delay that can amount from few days to several years (Panahi et al., 2016). This allows information and knowledge to be immediate and easy to gain.

Not only the dissemination of already published knowledge can spread faster, but also the publication of new information, making the public more update, potentially on everything. Social media are actually immediate. Events that happened on the other side of the world can be shared in real time: it is now possible to experience 'live' a Tsunami, a war, a conference, a public debate, a robbery and so on, with no filters, no manipulation, only as they are, worldwide (Qu et al., 2011).

However, this dynamic and velocity of the information are linked to a great inconsistency and non-reliability of the news. In other words, there is a great variability in the quality of the information on social media. It is possible to find, at the same time, very high-quality information and very low-quality ones, even abusive (Agichtein et al., 2008). This can be related to a lack of professional evaluation before getting published, moreover, a lack of those traditional mechanisms that allowed

¹ Journalists, editors, owners, etc.

users to determine the credibility of the source (Westerman et al., 2011). The challenge put in place by social media are dual: on one hand, there is an overload and excess of information that often does not allow users to understand very much about a certain topic; on the other hand, the aforementioned lack in regards of the quality of the information should need a constant and laborious work on checking and monitoring the content quality and credibility by the users (Westerman et al., 2011). However, credibility is a perception, not something intrinsic to a specific channel or source (Fogg and Tseng, 1999). There is not only one thing that can play a role in the perceived credibility of online materials, for example, site design features, source attributions or the reliance users give to social media's information; what is not very well known is how people judge the information they gain within social media (Westerman et al., 2011). Nonetheless, users tend to trust by default their favourite news outlets, and they tend to trust more local news and local outlets. Based on this assumptions, it is possible to say that credibility is shaped by peculiar subjective characteristics (Turcotte et al., 2015). At the same level as the outlets, it is possible to find 'friendship', or 'online friendship'. Users tend to trust and perceive as true and credible if the friend who shared the information is perceived as trustworthy. More a 'friend' is believed to be an expert on a certain field, or highly knowledgeable about a specific topic, higher in credibility will be the perception of the information shared (Turcotte et al., 2015). Moreover, the perception of the credibility of Internet-based information can be shaped by the individual awareness or knowledge users have of social media self-efficacy (Hocevar, 2014). Even if promises of new tools and new approaches in order to fight the overload of information have been made, all the challenges mentioned above are still in place (Zeng et al., 2010).

2.3 Social Media and Public Opinion's Manipulation

It is not a surprise or nothing new neither that the news media can influence or shape the public opinion (Amnesty International, 2017). One of the first authors who discussed this influence was Walter Lippmann in 1922, when in his book 'Public Opinion' he described that what the public opinion knows is based mainly on what the media choose to tell them, shaping the public mind (Walter Lippmann, 1922). Moreover, public opinion can attach a certain level of importance to certain news basing it on the emphasis posed by the media in sharing the same information: the priorities of the media are the priorities of the public (Lippmann, 1922). Social media are a mere extension of this mechanism. Being the social media the main platform when looking for news and

information, it is consequential that they also became a field for propaganda and disinformation (Amnesty International, 2017). The main element, or at least the most famous - or infamous - are the 'fake news'. Fake news have always existed, even when news and information were circulating only through printed press, but they were the exception rather than the rule (Holiday, 2012), and with social media they have developed more sophisticated ways to reach a broad population and mislead news consumers (Freedom House, 2017). Notwithstanding, the term does not have an agreed definition, but for the main purpose of the research, the term will refer to a large number of disinformation and misinformation circulating online (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Narrowing it down to a definition, fake news are:

'News articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.'

(Shu et al., 2017, pg. 23)

Perhaps, the important point of online disinformation, labelled fake news or not, is that they are having important and negative effects on how people are consuming the news, reflecting on the entire society (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Shu et al., 2017).

The significant number of fake news allowed to circulate by social media caused a change in public perception of journalism (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Research has demonstrated that the public trust in the institution of news is suffering a constant decline (Gronke and Cook, 2007). In fact, for what concerns the past decade, public credibility ratings for news decreased for all types of media and all types of outlets (Turcotte et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, the reason why news are manipulated should be understood. The Cambridge Dictionary definition of manipulation states that manipulation is:

'Controlling someone or something to your own advantage, often unfairly or dishonestly.'

(Cambridge English Dictionary²)

Therefore, referring to social media as previously defined as a system through which information can be spread to reach a broad potential audience, social media manipulation is the control of this system of communication, in order to create one's advantages (Fitzpatrick, 2018). This kind of manipulation exploits the difference between perception and reality, finding at its basic the way of say 'where there is smoke there is fire', letting the unreal to become real (Holiday,

² Accessed July 3, 2018.

2012). In the comprehensive study made on the Freedom of the Net by Freedom House (2017) it has been demonstrated that one of the social media manipulators can be the Government (this aspect will gain more importance when related to the case study). Moreover, 'governments around the world have dramatically increased their efforts to manipulate information on social media over the past year' (Freedom House, 2017). Different are the reasons behind this manipulation which, for example, can be linked to the spread of government views in order to drive particular agendas or to counter-government critics which want to gain support for international actions. These practices, but not only the governmental one, are made possible through the utilisation of technical tools as bots, propaganda producers and fake news, with the principal aim to gain high visibility and consistency with trusted content (Freedom House, 2017). Not only governments produce fake news with the purpose of manipulating the public opinion, but many different actors are involved. Writers, marketers, press agents, journalists, activists could all be potential generators of fake news with the aim to manipulate the public opinion (Holiday, 2012).

Italy, the chosen country for the research, have a long history of public opinion manipulation through traditional media, in part related to different elections, where Silvio Berlusconi, owning the 'media empire' were also the Prime Minister (Ragnedda and Muschert, 2010).

In order to relate the actual situation of social media to the chosen country for the research, a preamble is needed. The Italian government does not impose any restriction at the Internet access along the country and, perhaps more importantly, the Italian government does not proactively manipulate news websites (Freedom House, 2017). Italy was also a pioneer in regards of 'Internet Rights', being the first European country to adopt a 'Declaration of Internet Rights' in July 2015, establishing Internet access as a fundamental right, promoting the freedom, the equality and the neutrality of the Internet (Camera Dei Deputati, 2015). Lately, the political debate in Italy has tried to tackle the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media, with a legislative proposal in order to ban fake news, proposing jail time for who publishes news that could create public unrest. At today (July 2018) the proposal is still a draft and it is not assigned yet to a parliamentary commission (Senato della Repubblica, 2018). Even if there is no evident sign of a government manipulation of information, Italy is not a totally free country for what regards the freedom of the

press³, it actually sits at 31/100 grades of freedom, where 0 is totally free, and 100 is not free, gaining the label of partially free country in regards of freedom of the press (Freedom of the press, 2017).

The possibility to restore trust in social media is ahead, and it must not require undermining media freedom. The first step may be public education in order to teach citizens the tools to detect fake news and misinformation. The second step, not mandatory in this order, may be to guarantee the same regulations for political advertisement online as it is offline. Lastly, new policy interventions seem to be required (Tambini, 2017).

2.4 Social media, Journalism and War

Historically, journalists were the main eyewitnesses of any conflict, reporting facts concerning those who were fighting and about those who were suffering the consequences of the war (Sacco and Bossio, 2015). Overall, the importance of verified news and information in order to define a good journalistic work has not changed through the time (Sacco and Bossio, 2015). What changed with the raise of social media is how journalists and public experience and understand the news and information related to the war: a global flow of information have allowed people to get closer to the war experience (Sylvester, 2011). Perhaps, the most significant change can be found in the possibility brought by social media to allow a bigger number of voices to create information and news on a public domain (Sacco and Bossio, 2015). Moreover, social media created the possibility of a network for reportage and engagement with events in real time (Sacco and Bossio, 2015), bypassing in some way the traditional tools of news production (Browne et al., 2015). The so called 'Arab Spring' is a good example of engagement between journalists and activists on the creation of social media contents in regards, for example, the protests that overflowed in many Arabic countries (Sacco and Bossio, 2015). In fact, the Syrian civil war is the most mediated conflict in history (Linch et al., 2014).

Social media present a dual character of simultaneously advantages and disadvantages for journalists and journalism in general. Starting from the positive side of the gained new technologies, social media have add dynamism to journalism, which nowadays can rely on many

³ Freedom of the press is 'an index ranks of 180 countries according to the level of freedom available to journalists. It is a snapshot of the media freedom situation based on an evaluation of pluralism, independence of the media, quality of legislative framework and safety of journalists in each country. It does not rank public policies even if governments obviously have a major impact on their country's ranking, nor is it an indicator of the quality of journalism in each country' (Reporters without borders, 2018, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index>).

new sources and quicker sources, allowing to breaking news to arrive directly, for example for what concern the 'Arab Spring', from the heart of the protests (Cottle, 2011). Although it is important to underlying social media are an important tool for journalists' work, it should be seen as one of the many tools available (Browne et al., 2015). Moreover, more space has been given to the voiceless, to the ignored, destroying the myth for which information about war and conflicts can come only from official sources. Nonetheless, the words of the voiceless allowed new narratives on the Arab Spring to come out, opening the gates to new voices, creating new ways of reportage of a specific conflict (Otto & Meyer, 2012). A not new figure⁴ is going side by side with journalists, especially in the case of the 'Arab Spring': the citizen journalists⁵. Citizen journalists are going mainstream with their reportage, filming, portraying events from the heart of the conflict, with no filters, as they happen, blurring the boundaries with professional journalists (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009).

However, there are many dark points that need to be considered. Talking about this new phenomenon of citizen journalists, there are a multiplicity of actors that can act as citizen journalists, with many different reasons behind their behaviour (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). Their reportages can hardly be submitted to a cross-checking of sources and information can easily be altered and manipulated, using the 'live' reportages as propaganda or for other specific purposes. This huge online presence of various points of view (professionals and not) can create contradictions, rumours and speculations which can go global very fast, creating perhaps false news and misinformation. In fact, social media can be considered as a place of doubt (Browne et al., 2015). The difficulty in verifying the sources in order to recognise quality content is the major disadvantage of the social media as news sharing. Those news often present a lack in matching with the standards of objectivity, independence and accountability that are characteristic of a good journalistic work. Moreover, much of the online content is out of context and missing in-depth explanation, allowing interpretation of any kind. What is missing is quality content verifiable in first hand. Having drawn these considerations, social media should not replace traditional media and traditional sources for journalists, but they are a great extension of the traditional tools (Lee-Wright & Philips, 2012). Journalists must still have a role of gatekeepers for the truth, allowing a balance between sources online and on the ground, letting them coexisting, focusing especially on the

⁴ It's not a new figure because it was already of a certain grade of importance during the Indonesian Tsunami in 2004, the London bombings in 2005, the Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Mumbai attacks in 2008 (Al-Ghazzi, 2014).

⁵ Citizen journalist: "ordinary individuals (who) temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in newsmaking, or even spontaneously during a time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene" (Allan, 2013, p. 9).

ensuring of quality as first thought. However, this should not keep journalists away from the field, when thinking that there are more info online than on the ground (Lee-Wright & Philips, 2012).

2.4 Case Study: the Chemical Attack on the City of Douma of the 7th of April 2018

a. Arab Spring

The case study is embedded in a series of events that has been called 'Arab Spring', terms which indicates the uprising against long-standing regimes in the Middle East and North African region, begun at the end of 2010 (Rane et al., 2014). Movements for freedom and democracy have brought many people in the streets protesting against social, economic and political situations that were perceived as oppressing (Van Dijk and Hacker, 2018). However, the population was not the only actor involved in the protests, but NGOs and Human Rights groups played an important role in promoting a shared feeling of human rights violations, pushing the Western countries in supporting the uprising. At today, the protests resulted in the fall of the Tunisian President Ben Ali, the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi and many more other countries has been forced in making concessions and reforms (Rane et al., 2014). Following the results in the aforementioned countries, the Syrian population chose to follow them, going to the streets, demonstrate in a pacific way for their rights. Unfortunately, the protests in Syria turned into a civil war that is still going on at the day of the writing (July 1, 2018).

b. Syrian Civil War and the Chemical Attack of the 7th April 2018

Given the complexity of the Syrian civil war, it can be challenging to summarise it and present all the facts related to it. It is seven years of civil war or, as argued by Maria Saadeh⁶ in an interview for *IlGiornale.it*, seven years of an International war against the Syrian State (Caputo, 2015).

The civil war in Syria started as a protest for freedom and democracy by mid-2011 (March). The official version of the conflict assert that the regime of Bashar Al-Assad responded to this protests with brutal force, killing hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoning many more (Al Jazeera, 2018; Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015; Rane et al., 2014). After few months, in July 2011, the protests began to be shaped as a civil war, as a consequence of the decision of military's defectors to form a group, a rebel group, the Free Syrian Army, in order to overthrow the Al-Assad regime

⁶ Former Independent Syrian MP.

and government (Al Jazeera, 2018). The Western media did not address the situation as a civil war until 2013, generally describing the Damascus government as a fierce dictatorial government, that oppressed, repressed and massacred its own population (Caputo, 2017). At today more than 465.000 Syrians have been killed during the conflict, over a million injured and over 12 million have been displaced (in 2012 Syrian could count a population of 22.5 million, almost half of them flown out of the country⁷). At the beginning of the conflict the civil war was describe as a two-sided civil war, on one side the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and on the other side the 'rebels', where Assad was the bad guy who was killing its own population in order to maintain the power, and the rebels were civilians who were fighting in order to gain freedom, democracy and a better future. However, more than a two-sided conflict, the civil war in Syria can be described as a 'kaleidoscope of internal conflicts' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 8). It has been estimated that the rebel army comprehend more than a thousand independent groups, which divide, coalesce, blend with one or another all the time (Jenkins, 2014). Nonetheless, not all of these rebel groups are made by civilians, actually a small part of it, in fact they are defined as non-state armed groups (Podder, 2013). It is very complicated to list all of them, both for they changing nature and affiliation and for their, sometimes not clear, purpose. Within these groups are 'hiding' terroristic groups, on top of the list Al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS). A huge part of what the world knows about the conflict (and in general about all the Arab Spring) was not shaped by professional journalists, reporters, TV or print media as usually has been along the conflicts of the twentieth century, but it came via social media, through videos, photos and reports often shared by the so-called citizen journalists on social platforms (Lynch et al., 2014). The Syrian civil war has been defined as the most social mediated civil war in history (Lynch et al., 2014). In fact, social media have enabled protesters to report events as citizen journalists, covering the protests and the police reactions. Furthermore, when the protests became civil war, all the fights, the attacks and counter attacks could have been seen worldwide in real time thanks to the efforts of civilians (Rane et al., 2014). Noteworthy is the fact that even if social media have enabled the world to see the Syrian situation through the eyes of its population, it is hard to distinguish the truth from the fiction. Indeed, not only civilians had access to social media in order to share videos and photos, but every group involved in the conflict could have shared those types of information. Reasonably, it has been argued that this specific war is fought half on the field and half on the social media, becoming a propaganda war from both sides (Rane et al., 2014).

⁷ Source: worldpopulationreview.com.

c. The case study: the Chemical Attack on the city of Douma of the 7th of April 2018

It is along this background that the supposed chemical attack on Douma of the 7th of April 2018 took place. The city of Douma, in the Eastern Ghouta region, were controlled by a Syrian opposition group called Jaysh al-Islam, which fight the Regime, the Islamic State and selected Kurdish forces (Stanford University, 2017). There is not, however, total agreement within the media in regards of who was really in control of the city on the 7th of April. What the Western has been told is that the Russian-backed Syrian government forces defeated the Jaysh al-Islam forces, and they reached an agreement in order to give back the city to the regime. Thousands of rebels and their family seem to have already left Douma on the day of the attack, even if they never confirmed their defeat (Nehme, 2018). This has been argued by an independent source on the 2nd of April 2018 (reuters.com). However, other official sources (france24.com, thetimesofisrael.com,) pointed out how Jaysh al-Islam surrendered only after the chemical attack. Potentially, the situation in which Douma was, could make a major difference in understanding the chemical attack. Why should Assad attack a city of which the regime just got back in control of? The Regime of Assad has been accused as responsible for the chemical attack (BBC News, July 10, 2018; The Sun, May 3, 2018; Panorama, April 12, 2018; TGCOM24, April 8, 2018). Moreover, the Western media stated that the victims of the attack were found positive for chemicals, such as chlorine and toxic chemical agents as sarin (The Sun, May 3, 2018). In the days following the supposed chemical attack, the major media shared many videos of the attack per se and the consequences on the Douma population and those videos are still available online⁸. The Western coalition forces of U.S., U.K. and France, mindful of the red line put by the International community in regards of the use of

⁸ Three sources can be found online, as following:

1) <https://www.panorama.it/news/esteri/siria-attacco-chimico-duma/>.

2) http://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/mondo/siria-sospetto-attacco-chimico-su-douma-almeno-100-morti-trump-putin-e-iran-colpevoli-assad-animale-_3132876-201802a.shtml.

3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqikjoh4Js0>.

chemical weapons with the Chemical Weapons Convention⁹ of 1997¹⁰, chose to carry out a revenge strike over Syria on April the 13th. Six days after the chemical bombs were supposed to have been dropped by the regime (The Sun, May 3, 2018), the Western coalition launched precision strikes on three Syrian chemical weapons facilities (Arms Control Association, 2018). The only proofs available at the time were press and social media reports (OPCW¹¹, July 6, 2018). On the other side, the Assad regime has always deny its implication in the chemical attack over Douma. The OPCW started its investigation because:

‘Casualty levels ranging from 40 to 70 deaths, including large numbers of children, and hundreds of chemical-related injuries, were reported. There were mixed reports of what toxic chemicals had been used, with some citing chlorine and others citing sarin, or mixtures of chlorine and sarin. Images and videos posted online showed casualties in a residential building as well as victims being treated at a hospital, reportedly for chemical exposure. Photos and videos of cylinders allegedly used in the two attacks were also posted online.’

(OPCW, July 6, 2018, p.3)

While this research project were written (May - August, 2018), the OPCW declared that no signs of nerve agents were found in the investigation on environmental samples or plasma samples from the alleged casualties collected in Douma after the 7th of April 2018 (OPCW, July 6, 2018). Nonetheless, ‘work by the team to establish the significance of these results is ongoing’ (OPCW, July 6, 2018). It is still, three months after the supposed chemical attack, not definitely established if the chemical attack happened or not. However, The English Prime Minister Theresa May said the counter-attack of the Western coalition was right and legal (The Sun, May 3, 2018).

⁹ Art. 1 General Obligation of Chemical Weapons Convention:

1. Each State Party to this Convention undertakes never under any circumstances:

(a) To develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, or transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to anyone;

(b) To use chemical weapons;

(c) To engage in any military preparations to use chemical weapons;

(d) To assist, encourage or induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention.

2. Each State Party undertakes to destroy chemical weapons it owns or possesses, or that are located in any place under its jurisdiction or control, in accordance with the provisions of this Convention.

3. Each State Party undertakes to destroy all chemical weapons it abandoned on the territory of another State Party, in accordance with the provisions of this Convention.

4. Each State Party undertakes to destroy any chemical weapons production facilities it owns or possesses, or that are located in any place under its jurisdiction or control, in accordance with the provisions of this Convention.

5. Each State Party undertakes not to use riot control agents as a method of warfare.

¹⁰ Syria is signatory of the CWC from 9/12/13.

¹¹ Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

2.6 Conclusion

One of the biggest advantages of having Internet in the daily life is the possibility to be anywhere at any time. Events can be share on social media in real time, allowing anyone who wants to, to be present in something even if it is happening on the other side of the world. Internet and social media have also allowed the voiceless to speak for themselves, allowing the truth to come out. However, it did not take long to propaganda and manipulation to start to dominate the virtual world as well as the traditional one. The civil war in Syria is a complex, ongoing situation, for which not even a single book can give it the space it deserve, in order to be understood. This conflict has been defined as the most social mediated war and the cemetery of the information at the same time. How is this possible? The present research has the aim to analyse this phenomenon.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The research will be divided in two different parts, one dedicated to the literature review of the topics, the other dedicated to the more practical part of the analysis. The literature review is important to explore the background of the research and the present state of the knowledge in regards to the topics of the research. The finding and the discussion will take place in the second part, creating a parallelism between the presented literature and the outcomes of the analysis.

This chapter has the aim to explain the methodology used along the research. The rationale behind all the elements of the research will be explained. The chapter will start with an explanation of the chosen philosophy, a variation of the feminist approach. In a second moment, the reason behind the chosen qualitative approach will be discussed. Furthermore, the strategy, the data collection and the data analysis will be deeply justify. Lastly, ethical issues will be annotated. At the end of the chapter, the limitations of the research will be illustrated.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The research will be a feminist research even if it will not be focus on women¹². Even though this research is not about women and not about a topic women-related, there is, along the feminist approach, almost everything the researcher believes in and had guided the research. Feminist philosophy is important especially for what concern the relationship between the researcher and the participants. As feminists do, the researcher believes in good research relationships, which focus on empathy and mutual respect, the possibility to allow flexibility (of methods) as a quality rather than an obstacle, avoiding the impersonal and detached behaviour often present along researchers (Birch and Miller, 2002). Moreover, self reflexivity can not be deleted if the aim is a total transparency in the process of knowledge production (Parr, 2015). The feminist methodologies give voice to their participants, focusing on people or groups of people in a position of disadvantage (Satsangi, 2013), but this concept could be extended to any research participant, allowing him/her to make his/her voice active part in the construction of knowledge.

Consequently, a feminist approach will be adopted during the interviews, allowing the researcher to build a relationship with the participants, making them comfortable, offering a fertile ground for discussion concerning the research topics based on the questions made, trying to stimulate the real views of the participants to come out. The participants views are their

¹² Feminist research is primarily understood as research on women and for women (Wilkinson, 1986).

interpretation of the reality, and this approach will lead the researcher to a 'double hermeneutics', an interpretation of another interpretation (Danermark et al., 2002). On the opposite hand, it is fair to say that many traditional social sciences researchers have identified subjectivity as an obstruction to the production of knowledge (i.e. positivism), more than an added quality (Khan, 2014).

'After all, the ultimate goal of all research is not objectivity, but truth.'

(Deutsch, 1954)

Feminist research is politically motivated, traditionally on the side of women, 'fighting' in those areas where women have been oppressed and/or exploited (Gibbs, 2005). Gibbs's theory is going to be at the base of the theoretical background that support the present research, expanding Gibbs' view towards a larger meaning. Feminism, as a political way of thinking, does not consider women as subordinated to men, and it works against the social wrongs of this meaning (Sheperd, 2007). Following the same reasoning, the population should not be subordinated to a political agenda whenever it is looking for the truth. 'News', accordingly with the Collins English Dictionary, is 'information about a recently changed situation or a recent event'. Even tough not every news reach the value to be published somewhere, the ones which make it, should be true. In this era of social media as major source of news and information (Pepitone, 2010; Kim and Sin, 2015), the population should be aware of the liaison between politics and news, becoming more sceptical when reading what appears to be the actual events. In this way, not only distinction between men and women should not be made, but neither between those who make the rules and the population (men and women together). Therefore, the research will adopt a sceptical point of view, analysing why and in which way news are manipulated, standing on the side of the oppressed, searching for a solution that will finally offer the tools to sort out the truth.

3.2 Research Approach

It has been considered as optimal the qualitative approach to conduct the present research, mainly because this type of approach allows flexibility and greater spontaneity between the researcher and the participants, creating more complex than a 'yes' or 'no' answer, even if it presents a difficulty to measure and to quantify the results of the research (Mack et al. 2005). In particular, semi-structured interview was the most appropriate data-collection method to investigate

the research topics because the main purpose of the research is to analyse the views, perspectives and representations of journalists, comparing them with the relevant literature. As Bauer and Gaskell (2000) stated, the main purpose of a qualitative research should be the exploration of different opinions on a certain topic, the different representation and meanings participants give to the same issue, rather than a collection of numbers or people. Moreover, within the wide range of qualitative methods available, semi-structured interviews have been chosen as the more appropriate tool to gain those information that otherwise were less likely to be obtained. The specific feature of language, present along semi-structured interviews, is its capacity to create an infinite number of descriptions and explanations for what concern any issue or aspect (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

3.3 Research Strategy

Qualitative research allows the exploration and the study of a phenomenon such as public opinion manipulation from the point of view of experts in the field, namely journalists (CIRT, 2018). As a qualitative research, the study is focused on individual experience and views, utilising a semi-structured interview approach, having as a first goal the investigation of the profound meaning of the experiences, opinions and subjective realities in the individual's own words (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Semi-structured interviews are the most accurate method in order to collect data on individuals' perspective and experiences (Ritchie, 2014), especially for what concern sensitive topics. Interviews provide an opportunity for a detailed investigation, helping with the deep examination of the complex system of news shared on social media. With semi-structured interviews the opportunity for the participants and the researcher to be spontaneous is gained. The aspect of the spontaneity is fundamental related to the research topic, and it will contrast with the organisation of the political, or whichever, agenda news shared on social media are required to follow. Analysing social media, often the side of the human talk is put aside, taking the risk to forget how much important is the possibility to become aware of untold and rich stories (DeVault and Gross, 2007). The semi-structure of the interview will allow to underline facts, concepts and norms, with the help of a topics guide, where the participant will be allowed to take the lead and to shape their own narrative. The role of the researcher will be to uncover the values and the culture of the participants. However, the interviewer will have an active role in moving the discussion through

specific areas (Ritchie, 2014). The data collection has to be less structured in order to be able to understand how participant conceptions or positions emerge through their speech and their narrative (Ritchie, 2014).

The topic guide of the interviews contain four topic (social media, fake news and manipulation of the public opinion, chemical attack in Douma, future development) which need to be explored along the interview. An interview sheet with all the questions can be found at Appendix 5. Nevertheless, it is important for the reader to keep in mind that the sequence of the questions can be altered and the way in which the questions are phrased can be slightly different for each interview, in order to follow the interviews' flow. The essence of the questions made during the interview is unmodified, in spite of the few stylistic changes of the specific words used.

3.4 Data Collection

As mentioned above, data collection has been made through the help of semi-structured interviews, conducted with four Italian war journalists. War journalists have been chosen because, historically, they are the main producers of news and information of any conflict (Sacco and Bossio, 2015) and their knowledge in regards to the case study and to the possibility of the presence of a news manipulation will be fundamental for the aim of the research. More specifically, the chosen four war journalists have been chosen because of their relevance on the Italian journalistic panorama with their participation and affiliation with the most popular journals and televisions, having written about Syria, having been there, having different political beliefs and ages. The range of age of the journalists goes from 26 to 67 years old, allowing different perspectives and different life experiences, being them less or more disenchanted from reality. The chosen country is Italy for the reason why in the last few years it has suffered from a loss in the level of freedom of the press¹³, presenting 31/100 on this value (Press Freedom Index; Freedom of the Press, 2017) and this could suggest a manipulation of the news, following a certain agenda.

The interviews' questions have been produced having in mind the four main topics of the research, specifically, the questions wanted to highlight the journalists' understanding and view for what concern social media and especially the relationship between social media and fruition of news and information, allowing the journalists to space within their own experience. Further questions were focused on the same topics mentioned above, linking them to the Syrian civil war,

¹³ See footnote 3.

focusing on the Douma's case study. Together with the aforementioned thematics, the manipulation of the public opinion, understood also as production of fake news, were always linked to the topics. Future development and a possibility of actions will also be investigated.

The first connection with journalists has been made by the researcher via email, explaining them the aim of the study, asking for their availability and will to participate in the research. After the researcher had gained a positive response, the researcher had sent via email the consent form to the participants asking them to send it back signed. In a second moment, the researcher asked for the candidates' availability and preference concerning the time of the interview. Interviews have been conducting via Skype and recorded with the help of a computer-based software (GarageBand). The researcher has conduct the interviews from her house, using a Superfast Sky Fibre connection. The recording of the interviews are saved on the laptop of the researcher, inside a folder protected by a password known only by the researcher. Nonetheless, the recording are uploaded as well on Dropbox, in order to be safe and available in case anything will happen to the researcher's computer. The transcriptions have been handled in the same way as the recording of the interviews, which have been made with Bluetooth headphones, in order to be listened only by the researcher. All the data collected will be deleted permanently after 18 months of their production - Jan, 2020.

3.5 Data Analysis

The ideas for the data analysis of this research have been elaborated throughout all the process of the research, as an ongoing part of the research. It is important to highlight how the data analysis has changed within the research, in line with the major themes that came out with the interviews. Moreover, in order to remain grounded with the data, the structure of the analysis allowed to emergent ideas to exist, to themes and topics to be revisited at any stage of the analytic process (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The investigation that have been chosen in order to create knowledge is qualitative content analysis, to examine and to observe the substantive meaning of the data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Content analysis has been chosen for different reasons. Qualitative content analysis, even though it is a qualitative methodology of analysis, involves a strict controlled methodology, where the material is analysed in a step by step process, following a sequential model (Mayring, 2002). Content analysis allowed the researcher to cover the complexity of the social situation under examination, allowing the researcher to deal with the vastly and

complexity of the data, reducing them step by step (Kohlbacher, 2006). Nonetheless, this type of analysis allows the researcher to analyse the latent content of the material as well, aiming to an observation of the complexity of the social phenomenon, without putting aside the context in which data occurred (Hartley, 1994). However, it is fair to recognise the limitations of the qualitative content analysis, mainly the fact that a replication of the study will be almost impossible task (Kohlbacher, 2006).

The analysis has been made on the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews conducted with four Italian Journalists. The transcription were rich in details and presented many explanatory evidences. Firstly, the transcriptions have been printed out, in order to make them more manageable. The researcher had in mind four major themes she wanted to investigate: social media and the fruition of news and information through them, manipulation of public's opinion through social media and fake news, the chemical attack on the city of Douma on the 7th April 2018, possible future actions and developments of the situation. These themes are 'sensitizing concepts', general reference to empirical instances (Blumer, 1954), which later developed in more analytical ones, following the meanings expressed by the participants. Every transcription has been read with a specific theme in mind, in order to complete the first phase of three of the methodological controlled analysis (Mayring, 2002): summary, where the aim is to reduce the material, preserving the essential content. For example, taking as an example 'manipulation of the public opinion', for every transcription has been highlighted the words and the phrases related in any way with the specific topic. With the second phase, explication (Mayring, 2002) the attempt was to explain the material, clarifying it, choosing what part of the data were relevant, explicating those data with the total context. During the third phase, called structuring (Mayring, 2002), the idea of the participants was summarised, looking for a particular structure in order to give it sense, determining final units of analysis. The same process has been applied to all the four topics. Successively, having done the same process with every transcription, the different themes were compared between the different participants, in order to find accord or disagreement. Finally, the salient points of the transcriptions, divided by theme, have been compared with the relevant literature.

As Hughes and Sharrock (1997) suggested, the explanations of the data has been done more at the level of the meaning rather than at the level of the cause.

The context of interpretation used is self-understanding (Kvale, 1996), allowing the researcher to summarise the views of the participants, their evidences and observations. Thanks to this reflexive approach, the researcher can consider herself as part of the research.

‘A reflexive reading will locate you as part of the data you have generated ... You will probably see yourself as inevitably and inextricably implicated in the data generation and interpretation processes, and you will therefore seek a reading of data which captures or expresses those relationships.’

(Mason, 2002, pg. 149)

3.6 Research Ethics

Ethics issues have been analysed and managed in the most possible serious way by the researcher. For instance, the participants have been asked to sign a consent form written in Italian, in order to make sure their deep understanding (Appendix 1). However, a translation in English of the consent form is available (Appendix 2). The consent form has been sent to the participants at least five days before the interview took place, allowing participants to have the time to read it, understanding it and signing it. In the consent form, there is also present a section regarding the anonymity: participants could choose if they prefer to be anonymous along the transcriptions and the data analysis. If they chose to be anonymous, their confidentiality have been respected and their names and any word or phrase or reference which could lead directly to them have been deleted from the interviews’ transcriptions. The participants have been able to withdraw from the interviews at any point, for any reason, without the obligation to give a reason for their choice. They have been made aware of this in the consent form.

An information sheet has been attached to the consent form. The information sheet explains in details the main aims of the research, what their participations implied, and what the researcher was hoping to gain doing the research (Appendix 3 - Italian version, Appendix 4 - English version). Moreover, relevant contacts details of the researcher were present in the information sheet. There were also the contact details of the researcher supervisor and of the Head of the Department, in case any participant would have needed further explanations.

The interviews took place on Skype, allowing flexibility to both the researcher and the participants. For what concern the researcher, she was located in her apartment in London, in

order to gain maximum privacy and the best Internet connection available to her. The interviews were transcribed with the support of Bluetooth headphones, making sure that nobody could hear any part of the conversation, and the transcriptions were made in the house of the researcher as well. No third eyes or ears were able to gain any information discussed during the interviews.

The recording and the transcriptions of the interviews have been saved on the researcher's computer, protected by a password, known only by the researcher. In order to guarantee the availability of the information at any time and under any circumstance, both recordings and transcriptions have been saved as well on a Dropbox folder, protected by a different password from the one mentioned before, accessible only by the researcher. No data will be transported on memory stick. All the data will be deleted after 18 months of their creation - Jan 2020.

To guarantee a safe work to the researcher it has been taken under consideration the possibility of a high level of stress that can show along the solo work conducting the research and the writing of the dissertation. The researcher is aware of the psychological support offered by the University of Roehampton to its students. Moreover, regular meetings with the supervisor have been planned in advance, in order to guide the researcher work and to check the manageability of the level of stress.

Health and Safety Risk Assessment Form for Ethics applications has been presented (Appendix 6).

Health and Safety Compliance Declaration for Ethics Applications has been presented (Appendix 7).

3.7 Research Limitations

The aim of the research is to analyse the war journalists' views more than to assign frequencies to the linguistic features, and in doing so the point of view of the researcher will influence the results (Atieno, 2009). Even if the researcher is aware of the influence she can have on the analysis of the data, it will be not true to state that her opinion and beliefs will not affect the data analysis in any way. Moreover, the researcher is aware of the interference her feelings could have on the outcome of the research, especially in regards of thematic of injustice or manipulation. The researcher analysed them as soon as their feelings appeared in order to control them and to manage their influence on the analysis.

A limitation of the research is intrinsic to human language: a word can have different meaning for different people (Atieno, 2009). Along the analysis of the transcriptions it could happen that ambiguities will come up. One of the most important thing to keep in mind for the researcher during the analysis was to listen carefully at the recording of the interviews in order to be sure of the meaning of a word or a phrase, to guarantee a maximum level of truthfulness to the output.

Participants are active subjects of the research. They have great power over the content of the data collected: they could potentially be manipulated by who they are working for, and choose to answer some questions in a certain way in order to respect someone else's agenda, controlling the content and shaping the research in their most preferred way (Sudenshna and Datt, 2016). It will be a researcher's duty to understand if this will be the case, analysing the biography of the participants, their political allegiance and their past articles, in order to have a better understanding of the person she is in front of.

Qualitative studies involve an intensive and laborious analysis process (participants recruitment, preparation of interviews questions, recording, transcriptions, data analysis) (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). Moreover, even if everything will be prepared with the maximum of carefulness, giving attention to any single detail, the conclusions could be different for a different researcher. Unfortunately, at a certain level the analysis is based on the personal characteristic of the researcher (Maxwell, 2005). For this reason, a limitation of the research is the impossibility for the results to be generalised. The findings can not be extended to a wider population with the same validity and accuracy a quantitative analysis can, mainly because these findings are not gained in order to discover a statistically significance throughout a larger population (Atieno, 2009).

Nonetheless, the small range of the sample can represent a limit. The views of four journalists might be not representative of the entire population - it has been estimated that in Italy in 2016 were active 35.619 journalists (AGCOM, 2017). It is true that nowadays is not so easy to find and contact a journalist that has being on Syrian soil during the civil war, most probably being the Syrian civil war the most dangerous war for journalists in history (Committee to protect journalists, 2016). Syria is the most deadly country for journalist for the fifth years in a row (2016), counting 14 death in 2016 (Committee to protect journalists, 2016).

As mentioned before, the interviews took place on Skype, for the main reason that the participants and the researcher were not in the same country when the interviews took place, allowing a cost zero to conduct the interviews, being geographically flexible, allowing an easy

audio recording. However, a good Internet connection was fundamental on both side of the video call and the researcher could guarantee only for her own quality of the Internet connection, having no control over the quality of the connections of the participants. This issue could have caused time lags in the conversation, breaking the interview's flow. Moreover, the researcher had to make sure she could see the non-verbal behaviour of the participants, in order to gain a very deep understanding of everything that was said. As last issue, technology is not always working as it should, it can fail for what concern the connections, data can be lost, part of the conversation can be not very clear. Especially during the transcriptions, part of the vocal could have been or result in not understandable audio, and a large amount of time can be required to understand everything that had being said (Janghorban, 2014).

For what concern this research in particular, interviews were conducted and transcribed in Italian, were analysed in Italian, however the findings will be written in English. The researcher is Italian native speaker (as the participants were) and she has an academic level of English, although the translation from one language to the other could require long time and a huge work, especially in order to maintain the meaning of words and phrases. A valid solution could have been to report original phrases and words in Italian, attaching the most pertinent translation available.

There are no limitations in regards of financial sources, time and availability of literature.

Chapter 4. Findings and Discussion¹⁴

The following chapter will analyse and discuss the data collected with the help of the semi-structured interviews. Four semi-structured interviews were conducting with four Italian war journalists via Skype, and recorded with the software GarageBand. The questions investigated the same topics with all the participants, however, in order to allow smoothness to the flow of the interviews, the questions were not formulated in the exactly same way and in the same order. A sample of the interviews questions sheet can be found in the Appendix 5. The recordings were well audible and the transcriptions clear and punctual. All the participants gave consent to use their names in the research if needed. This will allow the researcher to give, if necessary, a background to all participants, in order to contextualise their answers. The analysis of the interviews draw out themes and trends within the responses. Four main topics have been investigated:

- Social media and the fruition of news and information through them
- Manipulation of public's opinion through social media and fake news
- The chemical attack on the city of Douma on the 7th April 2018
- Possible future actions and developments of the situation

4.1 Interview theme 1. Social Media and the Fruition of News and Information through Them

This section analyses and discusses the findings that resulted from the interviews' transcriptions. Even if the interviews questions sheet presented a specific question on social media as source of information, all the participants kept referring to this topic throughout all the interview.

Three journalists out of four recognised the dual character of the social media in regards of the news consumption, presenting positive and negative aspects of it. The four journalists seemed to agree on the fact that a worldwide shift in the fruition of news and information is happening. The shift appears to be from traditional media, in particular newspapers, towards social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, and especially relevant when it comes to the younger generations¹⁵. The literature supports this view, showing how journalists choose more often to share their content on social media on daily basis, in order to build and maintain relationships with the community (Farhi,

¹⁴ All the translations of the quotes present in this chapter have been made by the researcher, and every quote will have the original Italian transcription that can be found in the footnotes.

¹⁵ 'Pochi leggono i giornali ormai anche i media tradizionali.' ('not too many read the newspaper, the traditional media neither.')(Participant 1, pg. 5).

'Le nuove generazioni non leggono più i giornali, i giornali sono in calo di vendite in tutto il mondo, e soprattutto i giovani si informano attraverso Internet, attraverso i social.' ('new generations do not read the newspapers anymore, newspapers are falling in sales all over the world, moreover, young people get informed through the Internet, through social media')(Participant 4, pg. 2).

2009). Nonetheless, surveys have already suggest how a significant number of people choose social media as the place where to share and to discuss news (Purcell et al., 2010). Social media has been defined by journalists as a 'great revolution'¹⁶ in regards of communication, information and connection between people. The collapse or the cancellation of a monopoly seems to be a positive thing according to one of the journalists¹⁷. More often it happens that traditional media have to follow the news published online, being not self-sufficient in many situations¹⁸. The fruition of news on social media has also been described as an 'overturn of a paradigm'¹⁹, referring to the fact that social media have guaranteed spaces of freedom where many information that were not considered and discussed on the traditional media were finally elaborated and shared²⁰. In fact, social media disrupt authorial structures, preferring a flow of information rather than static information (Hermida et al., 2012). Furthermore, social media allow different points of view to come out²¹ and they allow more news, frequently ignored by the mainstream, to appear²². A good example has been given by participant number 2, talking about his personal experience. A few months ago (March 26, 2018) he shared a video on Youtube²³ and Facebook criticising the speech²⁴ of an Italian writer and journalist, Roberto Saviano, done on RAI²⁵ in regards to the war in Syria (Mar 25, 2018). Participant number 2 pointed out what he should have done if Internet did not exist at that time: the only way he could reply to the speech the television shared across the nation would have been to write a letter to the Director of RAI ¹²⁶ containing his thoughts. Probably the RAI Director would have trashed the letter as soon as it was delivered, precluding to any form of communication to happen. Internet allowed him to create that video and to share it in a

¹⁶ 'Grande rivoluzione.' ('Great revolution') (participant 1, pg. 1).

¹⁷ 'Quando viene rotto un monopolio solitamente è sempre un fatto positivo.' ('When a monopoly is broken, it is usually a good thing') (Participant 2, pg.2).

¹⁸ 'È chiaro che ci sono stati dei casi in cui i media tradizionali, non essendo più autosufficienti dovevano inseguire Internet.' ('it is clear that there have been cases in which traditional media are no longer self-sufficient and have to follow the Internet.') (participant 2, pg. 2).

¹⁹ 'Rovesciato un paradigma.' ('Overturn of a paradigm.') (Participant 2, pg. 2).

²⁰ 'Molte cose che non venivano dette sui media tradizionali su Internet su Internet sono state in qualche modo elaborate e diffuse.' ('Many things that were not said on traditional media, on Internet on Internet they have been in some way elaborated and shared') (Participant 2, pg. 2).

²¹ 'Hanno sicuramente la possibilità di dare un altro punto di vista diverso.' ('They have for sure the possibility to give a different point of view.') (Participant 3, pg. 1).

²² 'Compaiono molte più notizie che in verità molto spesso sono trascurate dal mainstream.' ('more news appear that usually are often neglected by the mainstream') (Participant 3, pg. 1).

²³ Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipsOdQnDVPs>.

²⁴ Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z4-qX3tF8k>.

²⁵ Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) is the national public broadcasting company of Italy.

²⁶ One of the channels available at RAI.

independent way, allowing many people²⁷ to have a different point of view of the situation²⁸. Moreover, information can reach a great number of users²⁹ and news can be spread immediately all over the world, going beyond borders, languages and nations³⁰.

However, a discordant point of view came out. Even if the great revolution analysed before is still being recognised³¹, this new transformation of the world of the information, of the way how information is done, did not find yet a new arrangement³². The swift on the fruition of news lead to the point where 'everything is confused' (participant 4, pg. 2)³³. Concerning the negative side of the social media revolution, journalists state that the result of the substitution of social media to traditional journalism is the lack of professionalism in communicating the news³⁴. Moreover, the aforementioned substitution is contributing in destroying the profession of journalist and photo reporter, perhaps even because the 'mental laziness' of the journalists³⁵. Information available on social media are more than often not verified, and given by people that have no competences within the world of the information³⁶. Consulting the literature, it can be highlighted how diverse journalists show perplexity concerning the news shared online, specifically when it comes to the traditional norms of journalism (Revers, 2014). Participant number 4 states that if news are not double-checked and verified, they should not be published³⁷. The idea that unverified news should

²⁷ The video has more than 130.000 visualisations.

²⁸ 'Il problema, sai prendiamo il fatto di quella risposta che ho fatto a Saviano dalla Siria che secondo me è abbastanza interessante. Se per esempio Saviano avesse fatto quel monologo sulla Rai, no, e non esisteva Internet, io l'unico modo che avevo per rispondere a Saviano era per esempio di scrivere un messaggio, una lettera, al direttore del Corriere della Sera oppure al direttore di Rai1, in cui io scrivevo quel mio testo che io ho detto nel mio video. Cosa avrebbe fatto lui probabilmente, lo avrebbe ricevuto via mail e lo avrebbe cestinato un secondo dopo. Quindi non ci sarebbe stato un passaggio e una comunicazione. Il fatto di Internet mi ha permesso in maniera autonoma di poter fare quel video e di poterlo diffondere in maniera autonoma, e quindi ha avuto una sua viralità e ha avuto un riscontro abbastanza positivo.' ('If for example Saviano had made that monologue on Rai [...] and there was no Internet, the only way I had to respond to Saviano was, for example, to write a message, a letter to the director of Corriere della Sera or to the director of Rai1, in which I would have written the text I read in my video. What he probably would have done, he would have received it by mail and would have trashed it a second later. So a passage and a communication would not have existed. The fact that the Internet allowed me to be able to make that video and to be able to spread it autonomously, and so it had its way to be viral and had a fairly positive response') (Participant 2, pg. 5).

²⁹ 'Un numero di utenti impensabile.' ('An unthinkable number of users') (Participant 1, pg. 1).

³⁰ 'I social media travalica i confini, travalica la stessa lingua, travalica le nazioni.' ('Social media go beyond borders, go beyond the same language, go beyond nations') (Participant 1, pg. 2).

³¹ 'Siamo in una fase di grande trasformazione.' ('We are in a phase of great transformation') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

³² 'Non si è ancora trovato diciamo un nuovo assetto.' ('A new asset has not been found yet.') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

³³ 'Per cui si confonde tutto.' ('So everything is confused.') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

³⁴ 'Non avendone la professionalità.' ('Without having the professionalism.') (Participant 1, pg. 1).

³⁵ 'Distuggere questa professione'; 'Processo mentale di pigrizia dei giornalisti.' ('To destroy this profession', 'Mental process of laziness of the journalists') (Participant 2, pg. 2).

³⁶ 'All'interno dei social le informazioni molto spesso [...] non sono verificate e sono date da persone che non hanno competenza nel mondo dell'informazione.' ('Within the media the information are very often [...] not verified and are given by people that do not have any competence within the world of the information.') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

³⁷ 'Le notizie che non sono verificate non vengono pubblicate.' ('News that are not verified will not be published.') (Participant 4, pg. 7).

not be published has been referred as one of the most important unwritten rules in journalism. If this unwritten rule is not respected, it then undermines the very foundations of professional ethics³⁸. Participant number 2 even mentioned how, during their academic path, journalists use a well known manual that from its very first pages presents the idea of the importance of verification of the sources³⁹.

Another critic moved to social media in this research is their being a 'virtual enclosure' (participant 2, pg. 5)⁴⁰ where the critics, the protests and the disagreements do not go beyond the virtual space in order to reach the real world, do not go to the streets, to the protests, to the petitions or to any other form of political pressure, becoming an instrument of the system⁴¹. In order to escape this risk, participant number 2 pointed out that social media should be used 'as a medium but not as an end' (participant 2, pg. 5)⁴², suggesting to be sceptical during the readings, in order to gain tools that will be useful in real life too. The most critical journalists define social media as the 'cemetery of the information' (participant 4, pg. 10)⁴³. Are social media the end of information? It seems that both the interviewed journalists and the available literature highlight some critical points concerning the fruition of news through social media; however, the advantages brought by the new technologies can not be denied (Hocevar et al., 2014). It is interesting to notice how the most critical journalist is also the eldest (67 years old) and, on the other hand, the one that recognised greater merits to social media is the youngest (26 years old). This is also a reflection of the Italian demographic use of social media. Research shows how the 89.3% of Italian Facebook users are people within a range of age that goes from 14 to 29 years old; the same is found in the 73.9% of Youtube users (Russo for Zucchetti Centro Sistemi, 2017). Perhaps, the more a person uses a tool, the deeper can be the understanding of the tool, and it should not surprise that the generation which grows up using daily social media has a particular positive view of a virtual world that takes distances from the one before globalisation.

³⁸ 'Va a minare le fondamenta stesse dell'etica professionale.' ('it is going to undermine the foundations of the professional ethics.')(Participant 4, pg. 7).

³⁹ 'Nel manualetto che tu devi studiare [...] tra gli articoli primissimi c'è la verifica delle fonti.' ('In the manual you have to study [...] within the first articles there is the verification of the sources.')(Participant 2, pg. 3).

⁴⁰ 'È un recinto virtuale.' ('It is a virtual enclosure.')(Participant 2, pg. 5).

⁴¹ 'Questa massa virtuale critica nel virtuale e resta nel virtuale e non si riversa nel reale, quindi nelle piazze, nella raccolta firme, nelle manifestazioni, in qualsiasi forma dove tu puoi fare pressione politica è chiaro che diventa uno strumento di sistema.' ('This virtual mass criticises in the virtual world and remains in the virtual world and is not poured into the real world, so in the squares, in collecting signatures, in demonstrations, in any form where you can make political pressure is clear that it becomes a system tool.')(Participant 2, pg.5).

⁴² 'Utilizzare Internet come mezzo ma non come fine.' ('To use Internet as a medium but not as an end.')(Participant 2, pg.5).

⁴³ 'Sono i social il cimitero dell'informazione.' ('social media are the cemetery of the information.')(Participant 4, pg. 10).

4.2 Interview theme 2. Manipulation of Public's Opinion through Social Media and Fake News

General agreement has been found among the participants on the topic of manipulation through social media. To be fair, the journalist who was more sceptical about the use of social media as a source of information (participant 4) highlighted how propaganda and disinformation have always existed. The literature as well supports the presence throughout history of propaganda (Holiday, 2012). Propaganda dates back a few centuries, since the time when Alessandro Magno and Giulio Cesare were followed by people who had the main duty to report the events of the battles from the point of view of those who were paying them⁴⁴. The revolution happened at the beginning of the '90s, when news in real time, thanks to television first, then to Internet and social media, began to spread globally. Perhaps it is with this great revolution that politicians realised how important can be to control the public opinion in order to obtain its support⁴⁵. Participant number 4 gave examples of politicians shaping the public opinion, gaining the necessary support in order to take the decision to participate in a war. Generally speaking, Bill Clinton and the NATO intervention in Kosovo in the 1999 has been recognised as a case of public manipulation with the help of television (The Guardian, 2003; Bancroft, 2009)⁴⁶.

Furthermore, social media can be recognised as useful instrument of manipulation mainly for its velocity in spreading the information. The recognised algorithm behind the news sharing phenomenon is based on the principle for which you need to be the first in sharing news, in order

⁴⁴ 'La propaganda, o la disinformazione, [...] è sempre esistita, dai tempi di Alessandro Magno, dai tempi di... e i cronisti che andavano al seguito di Giulio Cesare e poi di Alessandro Magno, durante le grandi campagne militari, non erano altro che dei propagandisti, cioè degli, delle persone addette a raccontare la storia o le vicende diciamo nell'ottica del vincitore, nell'ottica di chi aveva interesse, nell'ottica di chi li pagava sostanzialmente.' ('The propaganda, or disinformation, [...] has always existed, from the times of Alessandro Magno, and the reporters that were following Giulio Cesare and then Alessandro Magno, during the big military campaigns, they were nothing else than propagandists, mainly people who had the duty to tell the story or the happenings from the point of view of the winner, from the point of view of those who had any interest, basically from the point of view of those who was paying them.') (Participant 4, pg. 3).

⁴⁵ 'Con l'avvento diciamo delle notizie in tempo reale, quella grande rivoluzione che c'è stata a partire dall'inizio degli anni '90, con la televisione globale, con le notizie appunto in real time, e poi ancor più con l'avvento di Internet e l'avvento delle social news, dei social network, la propaganda è diventata la vera arma di 'distruzione di massa' in mano a chi la può governare, no. Perché chiaramente ormai, lo sappiamo benissimo, il peso dell'opinione pubblica, nelle decisioni che prendono gli uomini politici, è diventata una determinante nella nostra epoca delle democrazie diciamo occidentali.' ('With the advent, let's say, of the news in real time, that great revolution that has been there since the beginning of the '90s, with global television, with the news in real time, and then even more with the advent of the Internet and the advent of social news, social networks, propaganda has become the real weapon of 'mass destruction' in the hands of those who can govern it, no. Because clearly now, we know very well, the weight of public opinion, in the decisions taken by politicians, has become a determinant in our era of democracies, let's say western.') (Participant 4, pg. 3).

⁴⁶ 'Bill Clinton non è che avrebbe potuto bombardare la Bosnia e la Serbia se non avesse avuto l'appoggio dell'opinione pubblica americana. O Bush invadere, attaccare l'Iraq diciamo, dopo l'invasione del Kuwait, perché l'opinione pubblica è importante anche per le decisioni che devono prendere gli uomini politici, anche decisioni di entrare in guerra.' ('Bill Clinton is not that he could have bombed Bosnia and Serbia if he did not have the support of American public opinion. Or Bush, invading, attacking Iraq, say, after the invasion of Kuwait, because public opinion is also important for the decisions that must be taken by politicians, even decisions to enter the war.') (Participant 4, pg. 3).

to be the first of the hierarchy of the trend topics, regardless of the truthfulness of the information⁴⁷. Moreover, when a news is retracted, it is recognised as fake news or as a misleading content, it would not be shared, or, even if it would be made available online, it would be at the bottom of the hierarchy of the information⁴⁸. This impossibility, or lack of will, to share the truth as a leading content is masked making an uncomfortable news to fall into oblivion⁴⁹, otherwise it will create a so called short-circuit, disproving all that has been said for real before⁵⁰. With this background, manipulation is a natural consequence for the journalists of the research. On social media anyone can write anything and its opposite⁵¹ and this can be used in order to discredit the main sources of information⁵² and in order to share fake news or misinformation to control and manipulate the public opinion. Public opinion manipulation is recognised by the interviewed as fundamental to gain control, to do political propaganda, to reach the public support for political moves⁵³. Two cases have been reported as examples of political manipulation through social media both correlated with political elections.

The first case is the election of Donald Trump, phenomenon of disruption with the traditional establishment, phenomenon that has been helped by Facebook⁵⁴ and Twitter (Pontrelli, 2017). Trump was given as loser by the main analysts (O'Boyle, 2016), however, he was what the multitude were looking online⁵⁵. Even Trump himself declared that he would never have won the

⁴⁷ 'Quando tu rientri in un algoritmo, tu rientri in un flusso di notizie, un trend topic, e quindi tu devi dire la notizia il più velocemente possibile per rientrare in questo flusso ed essere il primo della gerarchia del flusso del trend topics.' ('When you are part of an algorithm, you are in a stream of news, a trend topic, and then you have to tell the news as quickly as possible to fit into this flow and be the first in the trend topics.') (Participant 2, pg. 4).

⁴⁸ 'Per quanto possa essere smentita, de-costruita, rielaborata o ricostruita questa notizia non verrà data, o se verrà data arriverà per ultima nella gerarchia delle informazioni.' ('For how much a news can be denied, de-constructed, re-worked or reconstructed this news will not be given, or if it will be given it will come as last in the hierarchy of the information.') (Participant 2, pg. 4).

⁴⁹ 'Far cadere nel dimenticatoio una notizia scomoda.' ('To forget an uncomfortable news.') (Participant 2, pg. 8).

⁵⁰ 'Creerebbe quello che viene chiamato cortocircuito no, cioè andrebbe a smentire tutto quello che è stato detto prima.' ('Would create what is called a short circuit, that would deny everything that was said before.') (Participant 2, pg. 8).

⁵¹ 'Chiunque può scrivere tutto e il contrario di tutto.' ('Anyone can write anything and its contrary.') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

⁵² 'Screditare completamente quelle che sono le principali fonti di informazione serie che abbiamo a disposizione.' ('Completely discredit those which are the main serious sources of information that we have available.') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

⁵³ 'Il peso dell'opinione pubblica nelle decisioni che prendono gli uomini politici è diventato una determinante nella nostra epoca delle democrazie diciamo occidentali.' ('The weight of public opinion in the decisions taken by politicians has become a determinant in our era of democracies, let's say western democracies.') (Participant 4, pg. 3).

⁵⁴ 'Fenomeni di rottura con l'establishment tradizionale.' ('Phenomenon of break with the traditional establishment.') (Participant 2, pg. 3).

⁵⁵ 'I social media hanno caratterizzato le elezioni di Trump che veniva dato per perdente sia dai sondaggi sia dai principali analisti nazionali e internazionali.' ('Social media have characterised the election of Trump that was given as loser from both the main polls and from the main analysts, national and international.') (Participant 3, pg. 2).

'La Brexit e le elezioni di Donald Trump sono due fenomeni che sono stati aiutati attraverso Facebook e attraverso Internet.' ('The Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are two phenomena that have been helped through Facebook and through the Internet.') (Participant 2, pg. 3).

'Si è visto quello che è stato fatto con Donald Trump negli Stati Uniti.' ('We have seen what is has been done with Donald Trump in the United States.') (Participant 4, pg. 2).

election without Twitter (Bains, 2017). One of the identified strategies, among the present research, used by Trump was, and it still is, to discredit the main sources of information, accusing them to share fake news⁵⁶. Trump refused to answer to a question of CNN during a press conference after his meeting with Theresa May (July 14, 2018), justifying his actions through the accusation that the CNN is a fake news producer (La stampa, 2018)⁵⁷. This represents how confusing is becoming the world of the information, were those people who are producing fake news are actually accusing one of the most reliable sources of information to do so⁵⁸. The interviewed journalists observed something similar during the last election in Italy: the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Stars Movement) and the Lega (two Italian political parties), that were not considered as possible winners, won the election, and their success is linked to their use of social media as their way to communicate with the population⁵⁹. Evidences can be found also in the literature (Venturini, 2017). Often, the professionals of the disinformation⁶⁰ do not need fake news to drive the public opinion, a mix of true news with false ones could be enough⁶¹. The journalists noticed how exactly this mixture of information drove the American election, highlighting how it is still happening most of the time when news, photos, videos come from citizen journalists, which are interpreted as truthful because they are 'live'; however, not always they represent the complete picture⁶². An example of the manipulation made up with the help of the citizen journalists has been reported: the Iranian's protests of December 2017. The majority of the videos shared online has been made by people that were participating to the protests, recorded with cellphones, recorded very close to the

⁵⁶ 'Penso a Donald Trump il quale, accusare il New York Times, per esempio, che è il giornale più serio che c'è al mondo, accusare la CNN, accusare la BBC e i grandi network di diffondere fake news.' ('I think of Donald Trump who is accusing the New York Times, for example, that is the most serious journal that exist in the world, accusing the CNN, accusing the BBC and the big network of sharing fake news.')(Participant 4, pg. 2).

⁵⁷ As today, the video is no longer available on La Stampa website (27/07/2018).

⁵⁸ 'È lui che fa le fake news [...] ti pare che vanno a fare le fake news, è lui che fa le fake news, capisci come tutto si confonde, capisci?' ('It is him that shares fake news [...] you think they are going to do fake news, it is him that does fake news, do you understand?')(Participant 4, pg. 10).

⁵⁹ 'Anche nel corso delle ultime elezioni italiane il risultato è andato molto al di là delle previsioni, soprattutto per quel che riguarda due formazioni come i cinque stelle e la lega che non erano considerate come possibili vincitori.' ('Also along the last Italian elections the result went much further than the expectations, especially for what concern two formations as the Movimento Cinque Stelle and the Lega that were not considered as plausible winners.')(Participant 3, pg. 2).

⁶⁰ 'Chiunque può essere un professionista della disinformazione. [...] Poi però ci sono i professionisti che magari fanno riferimento o vengono pagati da Stati e da Nazioni' ('Anyone can be a professional of the disinformation, amateurs, professionals, sometime payed by States in order to manipulate the information available online, or to influence political decision.')(Participant 1, pg.2). 'mettono in giro appositamente false informazioni per influenzare una campagna politica o per plasmare l'opinione pubblica' ('They share fake news on purpose in order to influence a political campaign or to shape the public opinion.')(Participant 4, pg.3).

⁶¹ 'Basta anche una notizia vera aggiunta a una notizia falsa o a una notizia esagerata per creare un'impressione nell'opinione pubblica come ad esempio è capitato nelle elezioni americane.' ('It is enough to have a real news added to a false one or to an exaggerated news in order to create an impression in the public opinion, as for example happened in the American elections.')(Participant 1, pg. 2).

⁶² 'Citizen journalists ti può ingannare, è una notizia in presa diretta ma non sempre riporta una visione d'insieme.' ('Citizen journalists can fool you, it is a live news but not always report the whole picture.')(Participant 2, pg. 9).

protests. These videos seem to show that a huge number of people were taking part to the protests. Moreover, many news available on social media in regards of the Iranian's protests were focusing on the great participation of the populations⁶³. When the photos and videos taken from a bigger distance started to circulate online were evident that the people actually participating to the protests were much less than it seemed⁶⁴ (Gidin, 2018).

Another example of news manipulation has been reported by participant number 3, when he tried to make a journalistic piece not in line with the mainstream flow. The people in charge for the television for which he was preparing a report said 'you can not discuss what the mainstream is saying' (participant 3, pg. 5)⁶⁵. They needed to reach a compromise. In the end, the truth has been hidden with an expedient: the political plan to eliminate the regime were shared only as a possibility, not as the reality of the facts⁶⁶. The same is happening nowadays with the mainstream news in regards of Syria: the ultimate goal is to overpower the regime of Bashar al-Assad, at any cost (Micalessin, 2018).

4.3 Interview theme 3. The Chemical Attack on the City of Douma on the 7th April 2018

A total agreement between all the participants emerged for what concern the supposed chemical attack on the city of Douma. As a consequence of a video shared on social media, probably by the White Helmet⁶⁷ or by someone who belongs to the rebel group of Jaysh al-Islam, immediately everybody got a news that was given as true with no verification⁶⁸. The reason behind

⁶³ 'The protests in Mashhad, which were attended by hundreds according to footage posted on social media and sent to CHRI, ended after about two hours after police intervened and arrested several participants.' (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2017) (Available on Social Media -Facebook- at: <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=iranian%20protests%20december%202017>) (Accessed: Jul 30, 2018).

⁶⁴ 'Per esempio le manifestazioni che ci sono state in Iran 4 mesi fa contro il caro vita, le notizie, i video che circolavano erano tutti video che appartenevano a persone che partecipavano alla manifestazione ed erano tutti video ripresi con il telefono delle manifestazioni in maniera ravvicinata in cui sembrava che ci fossero tante persone. Quando poi sono stati diffuse le fotografie e i video ripresi da lontano vedevi che erano pochissime persone.' ('For example the demonstrations that were in Iran 4 months ago against the high cost of living, the news, the videos were all videos that belonged to people who participated in the event and were all videos taken with the phone of the events in close manner which seemed like there were so many people. When the photographs and videos taken from afar were released, you saw that there were very few people.') (Participant 2, pg.9).

⁶⁵ 'Non puoi mettere in discussione quello che stanno dicendo tutti i principali giornali e i principali media del mondo.' ('You can not discuss what all the main journals and the main media worldwide are saying.') (Participant 3, pg. 5).

⁶⁶ 'Tre mesi dopo, quattro mesi dopo viene fuori la verità e si scopri che non era stata una rivoluzione ma un colpo di stato per omologare il regime.' ('Three months later, four months later the truth came out and we discovered that it was not a revolution but a putsch in order to homologate the regime.') (Participant 3, pg. 5).

⁶⁷ Syrian Civil Defence, impartial and humanitarian NGO (Foa, 2018).

⁶⁸ 'È partito da questi video che sono stati pubblicati da loro [...] cioè dieci minuti dopo del fatto tutti quanti hanno impugnato la notizia come se fosse vera.' ('It started from those video that have been published by them [...] basically ten minutes after the fact everybody took the news as it was real.') (Participant 2, pg. 6).
'I filmati che sono stati utilizzati sono tutti filmati che erano in gran parte di parte [...] prodotti da Jaysh al-Islam [...] o dai cosiddetti elmetti bianchi.' ('The videos that have been used are all videos that were for the majority for one side [...] produced by Jaysh al-Islam [...] or from the so-called white helmets.') (Participant 3, pg. 2).

the international agreement on the reality of the attack can be found in the flattening of the information made by the mainstream⁶⁹, which considered the conflict, from the very beginning, as a conflict where were involved two sides: the bad side, the Regime of Bashar al-Assad and the good side, the rebels, who were protesting for freedom and democracy and wanted to break down the regime⁷⁰. The European Union, at least for the first 18 months of the conflict, condemned the regime, imposed penalties, openly supported the rebels (Micalessin, 2018). However, after almost four years of war, the public opinion started to realise that not all the rebels are good, they are not all moderated, but many of them are extremist Islamic groups, such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra⁷¹. Moreover, a huge number of the people labelled as rebels are not even Syrians, they are people coming from abroad in order to make money (Micalessin, 2018). Indeed, the journalists admitted the news coming from war zones are difficult to control, conflict areas are zones where is complicated to gain access, to be reached on time and in an independent way, where many different parties are involved, and anyone try to control the news and to share the information they need⁷².

Interesting is how for these war journalists is important to recognise that there has been a shift in how a war is fought, nowadays half of it is fought with weapons, the other half is fought with information and disinformation⁷³. Furthermore, the interviewed acknowledge how the chemical attack on Douma⁷⁴ is a typical example of propaganda, manipulation of news and fake news⁷⁵. The 6th of July 2018 has been declared by the OPCW that no gas sarin or any other chemical agent has been used on Douma (OPCW, July 6, 2018). However the news of the attack has been shared all over the world as true and accurate, in order to support the mainstream dialogue against the regime (and consequently against Russia), showing to the world how important it is to stop the

⁶⁹ 'L'informazione sulla Siria è stata contraddistinta da parte dei principali mainstream da un appiattimento su quelle che erano le posizioni dei rispettivi governi.' ('The information about Syria has been distinguished from the main mainstream for a flattering on the ones which were the positions of the relatives governments.')(Participant 3, pg. 4).

⁷⁰ 'La guerra in Siria ci è stata venduta fin dall'inizio come uno scontro tra buoni e cattivi.' ('The war in Syria has been sold to us from the beginning as a fight between a good side and a bad side.')(Participant 1, pg. 3).

⁷¹ 'Gran parte di quei ribelli non erano buoni, non erano moderati ed erano sostanzialmente dei gruppi islamisti estremisti.' ('A big part of the rebels were not good, were not moderated and were basically extremist islamic groups.')(Participant 3, pg. 4).
'Forse questa distinzione fra buoni e cattivi non era molto corretta, ecco, anzi era assolutamente sbagliata.' ('Perhaps this distinction between good side and bad side were not very accurate, actually were totally wrong.')(Participant 1, pg. 3).

⁷² 'Tante fazioni, tante parti che tendono a portare l'acqua al proprio mulino.' ('Many factions, many parts that tend to bring water to their own mill.')(Participant 1, pg. 2).

⁷³ 'Metà della guerra si combatte con le armi alla vecchia maniera, l'altra metà si combatte con l'informazione e la disinformazione.' ('Half of the war is fought with weapons in the old style, the other half is fought with information and disinformation.')(Participant 1, pg. 2).

⁷⁴ The Douma attack is not the only supposed chemical attack in Syria used as propaganda (Micalessin, 2018).

⁷⁵ 'Esempio classico di uno propaganda, due di notizia manipolata e tre di fake news.' ('A classic example of one propaganda, two manipulated news and three fake news.')(Participant 4, pg. 8).

slaughterer (Micalessin, 2018). The manipulation of the information can be found in the experience reported by one of the participant. Participant number 2 was invited on the 13th of March 2018 to a conference in Damasco organised by Syrian and Russian armies where the public was informed of the possibility of a global media attack that would have affect the regime, in which the regime would have been accused to use chemical weapons against the population of the Ghouta. Three weeks later the media campaign of disinformation started its process and the regime already knew this was going to happen.

'When the international community have a political, diplomatic and militar operation to launch they need to follow a script, preparing the public opinion to something bigger.' (Participant 2, pg. 6)⁷⁶

It seems as the script is used in repetition⁷⁷.

At the time the interviews were conducted, there were not international agreement on what happened, or not happened, in Douma⁷⁸. Although news and information not in line with the mainstream were available at that time, there were no needs to share them. For mainstream information is intended the information that are not exposed to critic and without facts verification from the most of the international media (Micalessin, 2018). At the day of the writing (Aug 4, 2018) the world should know that no chemical weapon has been used on the city of Douma on the 7th of April 2018 (OPCW, Jul 6, 2018).

4.4 Interview theme 4. Possible future actions and developments of the situation?

Journalists analysed and criticised social media and their role as source of information, pointing out how the main issue in the pervasive amount of misinformation is the missing verification of the sources. Fortunately, improvement can be made on two different sides.

On one side, the public need to understand the importance of multiple sources of information. In fact, the primary responsibility in acquiring information belongs to the citizens (Chadwick and Howard, 2009). News need to be analysed, credible sources should always compared with

⁷⁶ 'Perché la comunità internazionale quando è decisa a lanciare operazioni politiche, diplomatiche, militari diciamo che segue un copione che è molto, è un copione già utilizzato ed è un copione che in qualche modo serve per preparare l'opinione pubblica a qualcosa di molto più grande.' ('When the international community have a political, diplomatic and militar operation to launch they need to follow a script, preparing the public opinion to something bigger.') (Participant 2, pg. 6).

⁷⁷ 'Come a Ghouta nel 2013.' ('As in Ghouta in the 2013.') (Participant 3, pg. 3).

⁷⁸ 'A Douma non sappiamo ancora con certezza matematica cosa sia accaduto.' ('In Douma we still do not know yet what happened with mathematic certainty.') (Participant 1, pg. 3).
È un caso molto dubbio.' ('It is a very doubt case.') (Participant 3, pg. 2).
'Non abbiamo la certezza assoluta di chi abbia compiuto quell'attacco.' ('We do not have the total certainty on who committed that act.') (Participant 4, pg. 3).

information shared by international organisations, in order to gain bigger awareness and credibility⁷⁹. Furthermore, the journalists suggested a minute of silence and reflection, fundamental to cross the sources. Indeed, the research framed how not only for the news shared on social media this process should happen, but in general, for any information, making the critical thinking the most important part in searching for the truth so far⁸⁰. Considering the case study of the Syrian conflict, it could be worth to implement the information gained through the mainstream with the information coming from the regime, the governative sources, both Syrian and Russian⁸¹. Doing so, it would be possible to develop a generation of critical thinkers, equipped with the skills necessary to play an active role in the intellectual pressure that should be made against who deliberately share news both online and on the traditional media⁸². Central must be the role played by the educational system, which should equip the new generations with enough skills and tools to interrogate themselves on the veracity of the information available on social media, on the possible manipulation of the information.

On the other side, who produces the news and information should give more attention to the content they produce, rather than the visibility they can get. Basically, journalists should go back to the basis of their profession, learning again those fundamental steps that make the profession. 'We should teach to journalists to do their job in a better way'⁸³ participant number 3 said (pg. 5). The first rule should be the direct observation of events, in order to make easier verification of the

⁷⁹ 'Se tu devi andare a cercare una notizia, o verificare delle notizie, vai intanto sui siti dei grandi media che sai che sono credibili, poi magari fai un double check con qualche organizzazione internazionale che non so può essere le Nazioni Unite o altre, che ti danno maggiore consapevolezza e credibilità, insomma hai questi strumenti.' ('If you have to go looking for news, or check news, you usually check the main media sites that you know are credible, then maybe you do a double check with some international organisation that, I do not know, can be the United Nations or others, that they give you greater awareness and credibility, so you have these tools.') (Participant 4, pg. 4).

⁸⁰ Per cui quello che bisogna fare è semplicemente avere un minuto di silenzio, un minuto di un momento di riflessione e la prima cosa da fare è incrociare le fonti [...] ma questo andrebbe fatto sempre, non solo se una cosa proviene da Internet, ma anche se una cosa viene detta da un media cosiddetto autorevole.' ('So what you need to do is to just have a minute of silence, a minute of a moment of reflection and the first thing to do is to double cross the sources [...] but this should always be done, not only if something comes from the Internet, but even if something is said by a so-called authoritative media.') (Participant 2, pg. 4).
'La critica ci sta ed è fondamentale.' ('Critic is fine and it is fundamental.') (Participant 2, pg. 5).

⁸¹ 'Valutare un po tutte le fonti di informazioni, non basarsi solamente sui mainstream, non basarsi solamente su quello che viene pubblicato sui principali media ma effettuare una esamina molto attenta e faticosa delle varie fonti di informazioni comprese quelle governative, comprese quelle governative siriane, comprese quelle russe, comprese quelle che arrivano sui social media.' ('To evaluate all sources of information, not rely solely on mainstream, not rely only on what is published in the major media but make a very careful and exhausting scrutiny of the various sources of information including those governmental, including Syrian governmental, including Russian ones, including those arriving on social media.') (Participant 3, pg. 4).

⁸² 'Crei sostanzialmente una generazione di pensatori, di critici che fanno massa critica ed eserciti che possano esercitare una pressione anche intellettuale su sia chi diffonde notizie sul web sia su chi diffonde la carta stampata.' ('Substantially create a generation of thinkers, critics who make critical mass and armies that can exert even intellectual pressure on both those who spread the news on the web and those who spread the printed paper.') (Participant 2, pg. 12).

⁸³ 'Dovremmo insegnare ai giornalisti a fare meglio il loro lavoro.' ('We should teach journalists to do their job in a better way.') (Participant 3, pg. 5).

sources⁸⁴. Concerning the subject of the citizen journalists, it can not be denied the advantage brought by technology in the production of information from the field⁸⁵ (Hermes, 2006). Nevertheless, a video is not a proof of truthfulness. As mentioned above, before taking a video or a photo made by someone and shared on social media as real, it is important to analyse the background and the possible implications of the element, in order to exclude any form of manipulation. This is especially true for journalists which write their pieces based on online information. Not only citizen, but also journalists should double-check their sources, finding out links with someone's agenda or, as for the case of Syria, belonging to a terrorist group.

Participant number 4 suggests to take a step back, in order to minimise the attention-seeking behaviour that lately characterise the profession, making any articles, any shared news anonymous, producing information considered relevant for the content rather than for who is delivering the information⁸⁶. This is what is actually happening in the Economist, which adopted a policy of anonymity (Lerner, 2015). Indeed, journalists can go back to the field, in order to bring back the reality and accuracy of the facts⁸⁷.

4.5 Conclusion

The content analysis shows how important and embedded is, nowadays, the fruition of news and information through social media. Even if great merits have been recognised, such as the possibility for alternative points of view to become visible, the possibility of manipulation of the information is recognised as a huge risk. The case study reveals how fake news are able to go mainstream, shaping the public opinion in order to support decisions governments aim to take. In order to become more sceptical, critical thinking should be taught as part of the programme within the educational system, equipping citizens with tools which will enable them to distinguish the veracity of an online news, moreover, of any piece of information. On the other side, the professionalism of journalists must regain the professional ethics that seems to be lost.

⁸⁴ 'L'unica regola è l'osservazione diretta dei fatti, la verifica delle notizie che però è molto difficile che venga fatta a distanza.' ('The only rule is the direct observation of the facts, the verification of the news that however is very hard to be made from distance.') (Participant 3, pg. 5).

⁸⁵ Perhaps, with our cellphones, the insider information from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004 would have never been communicated (Hermes, 2006).

⁸⁶ 'Tutti gli articoli erano anonimi, non venivano firmati, nessun protagonismo, per evitare il protagonismo.' ('All the articles were anonymous, they were not signed, no attention-seeking behaviour, in order to avoid the attention-seeking behaviour.') (Participant 4, pg. 6).

⁸⁷ 'Si può cercare di accendere una luce in questo cimitero per cercare un brandello di realtà dei fatti.' ('We can try to turn on a light in this cemetery in order to look for a shred of reality of the facts.') (Participant 1, pg. 4).

Chapter 6. Conclusion

The present research has the goal to answer three research questions, such as:

RQ1: Are social media manipulating the public opinion?

RQ2: What western media reported is different from what happened in Douma?

RQ3: How can a citizen be able to gain the truth via social media?

The project developed in a qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with four Italian war journalists. Comparing the relevant literature with the interviews' transcriptions it is possible to highlight the main role of social media in spreading fake news and misinformation, in order to manipulate the public opinion following someone's agenda. However, what emerged from the research is that social media are only one of the many tools available in order to shape the public opinion. Being public opinion's manipulation a not new phenomenon, the spread of technology as the Internet and the use of social media has helped in produce faster and broader manipulation. Both literature and interviews show how social media are now the leader in the panorama of news and information, with a constantly growing number of users who rely on Internet, more specifically on social media, when looking for information. Even if this revolution in the fruition of news has brought indisputable advantages, such as the immediacy of the information on global scale, the possibility for the voiceless to speak, the availability of news and information from remote and dangerous places where perhaps journalists are not allowed to be, these advantages do not come without cost. The unachievable verification of all the sources available online obstruct the truthiness of the information, and it allows anybody to dress the clothes of a journalist, creating considerable confusion on what can be defined as a relevant source of information. However, this disorientation may have been used by those who are willing to turn the public opinion in their favour, for example, when looking for support in order to justify missile attacks as counter-attacks for something that never happened.

It is a matter of fact, at the day of the writing (July 29, 2018), that the chemical attack on Douma of the 7th of April 2018 did not happen, no regime or rebel group can be blamed for such attack. What has been told to the Western public is different from what happened in Douma. The research shows how the public opinion is an important tool in the hands of the governments when justifications for their actions are needed. A sceptical analysis shows how the chemical attack could have been (the) only justification to the counter-attack of the Western countries, which needed a

reason to launch those missiles, if, as stated by journalists, their goal has always been to destroy the regime of Assad.

If a major power as a government use news in order to drive the public opinion how can a citizen be able to gain the truth, especially via social media? The acquired knowledge of the powerful engagement of the government in the production of news should stimulate a deep reflection in the citizens, which should be aware of the game played with their opinion. If, on one hand, journalists should stick more to their professional ethics and always double-check their sources, on the other, citizens should be equipped with more tools that can give them the ability to, if not detect fake news, to instil the doubt of it. Also, in this process, the educational system has a fundamental role. Not everything is written online corresponds to the truth, not always is genuine and maybe those who refer to social media in order to gain information should think twice before sharing a news or an information, being aware that is not going to influence only their opinion, but it could create a shared, not real, belief.

6.1 Personal development

I think the process of learning is not only about learning things, but involved a constant, sometime hard, personal growth. I learnt a new language, I learnt how to write and how to speak in a language completely different from my native one. Moreover, I learnt how to think in English, how to laugh in English and, of course, how to complain. But more than anything, I discovered how to use a critical thinking, not only towards the things I was ask to, towards myself as well. Moreover, I learnt how to be critical in regards of the news and information I read online, knowing now that a single piece of information is not making a news, but that it is important to integrate different sources of information, online and not. I found out I love the process of learning, with its up and down, from the initial struggle to the final satisfaction. I am more than grateful for all the passion and the enthusiasm my teachers put in their lectures and in their feedbacks on my works: these helped me to believe more in myself, starting to recognise my skills and strength. This research helped me to start to shape my future, I am finally not ashamed to show my interest towards the Middle East, and the possibility I had to interview so great journalists and so great persons that allowed me to know a little bit more about myself. Unfortunately, I think that 15000 words are not enough to give merit to such a topic, and this is what is pushing me to do not stop here, but to continue walk through this fascinating world of the research.

Appendix 1. Consent form Italian version



Numero del partecipante: _____

CONSENSO INFORMATO

News e informazione: l'attacco chimico in Siria (Douma) come caso di studio.

Grazie per voler partecipare al nostro studio, apprezziamo molto il tuo contributo.

Prendendo come caso di studio l'attacco chimico avvenuto nella città di Douma (Siria) il 7 aprile 2018, la ricerca si concentrerà su come le informazioni e le notizie relative al caso studio sono riportate nei Paesi occidentali, concentrandosi principalmente sull'Italia. Lo scopo del ricercatore è di delineare una possibile manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica e una possibile tendenza razzista.

Dichiarazione di consenso:

Accetto di partecipare a questa ricerca e sono consapevole di essere libero di ritirarmi in qualsiasi momento senza fornire una motivazione, sebbene, se lo faccio, capisco che i miei dati potrebbero ancora essere utilizzati in forma collazionata. Comprendo che le informazioni fornite saranno trattate in modo riservato (se scegli ciò) dallo sperimentatore e che la mia identità sarà protetta dalla pubblicazione di qualsiasi risultato e che i dati saranno raccolti e trattati in conformità con il Data Protection Act 1998 e con i dati dell'Università Politica di protezione

Nome.....

Firma

Data

Consenso all'anonimato: (da riempire solo se il partecipante vuole essere anonimo durante la ricerca)

Voglio che i miei dati vengano trattati nell'anonimato, non voglio che il mio nome appaia in nessun punto della ricerca.

Nome

Firma

Data

Nota: in caso di dubbi su qualsiasi aspetto della propria partecipazione o su qualsiasi altra domanda, si prega di sollevarlo con il ricercatore o il Supervisore. Tuttavia, si desidera contattare una terza parte indipendente, potete contattare il Capo Dipartimento.

Ricercatore

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Appendix 2. Consent form English version

Participant Number: _____



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

News and Information: the chemical attack in Syria (Douma) as a case study

Thank you very much for taking part in our study, we greatly appreciate your contribution.

Taking as a case study the chemical attack happened in the city of Douma (Syria) on the 7th of April 2018, the research will focus on how information and news related to the case study are reported in the Western Countries, focusing mainly on Italy. The aim of the researcher is to outline a possible public opinion's manipulation and a possible racist tendency.

Consent Statement:

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason, although if I do so I understand that my data might still be used in a collated form. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected (if choose so) in the publication of any findings, and that data will be collected and processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and with the University's Data Protection Policy.

Name

Signature

Date

Anonymity Consent: (To fill up only if the participant wants to be anonymous along the research)

I want my data will be treated in anonymity, I don't want my name appears in any point of the research.

Name

Signature

Date

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator or the Supervisor. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department.

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Appendix 3. Participant debrief Italian version



INFORMATIVA PER IL PARTECIPANTE

News e informazione: l'attacco chimico in Siria (Douma) come caso di studio.

Vorrei invitarVi a partecipare a uno studio di ricerca del mio MA Global Criminology che mira a indagare il ruolo dei social media nella diffusione di notizie e informazioni per quanto riguarda il caso di studio, concentrandosi su fake news e razzismo.

I social media hanno un ruolo dominante nel plasmare l'opinione pubblica e la percezione degli eventi (Meis, 2017). Prendendo come caso di studio l'attacco chimico avvenuto nella città di Douma (Siria) il 7 aprile 2018, la ricerca si concentrerà su come le informazioni e le notizie relative al caso di studio sono riportate nei Paesi occidentali, concentrandosi principalmente sull'Italia. Il ricercatore mira a delineare una possibile manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica e una possibile tendenza razzista.

Il progetto adotterà un approccio metodologico qualitativo e attraverso l'uso di interviste semi-strutturate e l'analisi del contenuto della trascrizione delle interviste identificherà le somiglianze e le differenze tra il/i punti di vista dei giornalisti e la letteratura pertinente, prestando particolare attenzione ai termini e ai concetti di razzismo. Lo studio si propone di acquisire una comprensione approfondita di una possibile manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica, contestualizzando i risultati all'interno della situazione politica italiana.

La ricerca chiederà a 5 giornalisti di guerra italiani un'ora del loro tempo (al massimo), e l'intervista avverrà tramite Skype. L'intervista verrà registrata con l'aiuto di un software (GarageBand) e trascritta eliminando eventuali dettagli identificativi. La trascrizione sarà effettuata utilizzando cuffie Bluetooth, in modo da essere ascoltate solo dal ricercatore. La trascrizione verrà salvata sul computer del ricercatore, in una cartella protetta da password. Solo il ricercatore conoscerà la password. La trascrizione, o gli estratti, potranno apparire nel rapporto finale e nelle pubblicazioni che ne potrebbero derivare. Le registrazioni possono essere ascoltate dal supervisore della ricerca e da altri che potrebbero essere coinvolti nell'esame della tesi.

È Vostra intenzione prendere parte a questo studio e, anche dopo aver firmato il modulo di consenso, avete il diritto di ritirare la Vostra partecipazione in qualsiasi momento prima del 10 luglio 2018, dopo questa data i dati saranno raccolti e analizzati.

Se decidete di prendere parte a questo studio, Vi verrà chiesto di partecipare a un'intervista semi-strutturata che durerà un massimo di un'ora.

Questo studio può provocare pensieri ed emozioni che possono causare stress, per questo motivo, avete il diritto di ritirare l'intervista in qualsiasi momento. Tuttavia, la vostra partecipazione sarà immensamente apprezzata.

La vostra riservatezza sarà tutelata in ogni momento durante questo studio, ma c'è un limite a questo: se si presenterà la possibilità di causare gravi danni allora potrei aver bisogno di intraprendere azioni appropriate (questo aderisce alle linee guida etiche dell'Università di Roehampton).

Se siete preoccupati per qualcosa in qualsiasi momento prima, durante o dopo lo studio, per favore contattate il ricercatore ed esso affronterà qualsiasi domanda Voi possiate avere. Tuttavia, se avete bisogno di ulteriori spiegazioni, non esitate a contattare il mio supervisore o il capo del Dipartimento per risolvere qualsiasi problema.

I risultati di questo studio faranno parte della tesi di laurea del ricercatore.

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Appendix 4. Participant debrief English version

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF

News and Information: the chemical attack in Syria (Douma) as a case study



I would like to invite you to participate in an MA Global Criminology research study which aims to investigate the role of social media in spreading news and information in regards to the case study, focusing on fake news and racism.

Social media have a dominant role in shaping the public opinion and perception of events (Meis, 2017). Taking as a case study the chemical attack happened in the city of Douma (Syria) on the 7th of April 2018, the research will focus on how information and news related to the case study are reported in the Western Countries, focusing mainly on Italy. The researcher aims to outline a possible public opinion's manipulation and a possible racist tendency.

The project will adopt a qualitative methods approach and through the use of semi-structured interviews and the content and texture analysis of the transcription of the interviews will identify similarities and differences between the journalists' points of view and the relevant literature, giving particular attention to terms and concepts of racism. The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of a possible public opinion manipulation, contextualising the results within the Italian political situation.

The research will ask 5 Italian war journalists one hour of their time (at maximum), and the interview will take place via Skype. The interview will be recorded with the help of a computer-based software (GarageBand) and transcribed with any identifying details of a third part removed. The transcription will be made using Bluetooth headphones, to be listened only by the researcher. The transcription will be saved on the researcher computer, in a password-protected folder. Only the researcher will know the password. The transcript, or extracts from, may appear in the final report and publications arising from it. The tapes may be heard by the research's supervisor and others who might be involved in examining the report.

It is your own willingness to take part in this study and even after signing the consent form you have the right to withdraw your participation at any point before the 10th of July 2018, after this date data will be collated and analysed.

If you decide to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview which will last a maximum of one hour.

This study may prompt distressing thoughts and emotions, for this reason, you have the right to withdraw the interview at any point. However, your participation will be immensely appreciated.

Your confidentiality will be protected at all times throughout this study, but there is a limit to this: if you disclose a risk of serious harm then I may need to take appropriate action (this adheres to the ethical guidelines of the University of Roehampton).

If you are concern about anything at any point before, during or after the study, please contact myself and I will address any question you may have. However, if you need further explanation, feel free to contact my supervisor or the head of the Department to resolve any issue.

The results of this study will be part of my MA dissertation.

Investigator

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Appendix 5. Semi-structured interview questions sheet

Hello,

Thank you to have decide to take part at my research. I do really appreciate the time you are giving to me. I want to remember you that your participation is totally your willing to do so, and that you can at any point withdraw it without giving me a reason if you feel uncomfortable or distressed or whatever. All the information you are about to give to me will treat with the maximum of confidentiality, and your name or anything explicitly related to you will be cancel from the transcription and from the research, in order to maintain your anonymity. Let's start with some question about you, in order to break the ice and to get relaxed.

What's your name?

How old are you?

Where are you at the moment?

How do you define yourself as a journalist? (What type of journalist you are)

How long have you been a journalist?

Ok, Thank you very much! Now it's time to get deeper in my research objects. You know I'm researching the relation existing between social media and news and information, taking as a case study the chemical attack on the city of Douma of the 7th of April 2018.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS MANIPULATION

Nowadays, always more people rely on social media to gain information about the world and to read the news. What do you think in regard of this? How can a person understand the truthworthiness of what he can read online? Are social media playing a major role in shaping the public opinion?

CHEMICAL ATTACK

What happened in Syria related to the case study? why? Why there are so many news in regards of this event, not always according with each others? Do you think there is a gap between the actual situation in Syria and the news reported in the Western Countries, in particular in Italy? There is online an interview released by an Italian Journalist that call the Syrian civil war the 'cemetery of the information'. What do you think this means? It is true?

FAKE NEWS

Online is it possible to read about the chemical attack and at the same time to read that it never happened. Which side are you on? How can a person now the truth?

RACISM

Is the social media reality the problem?

There is the possibility that this manipulation of the public opinion have a link with racism/ Islamophobia? Or better with the situation of immigration that is on fire in Europe (especially in Italy) today?

How the raise of the racism in Italy is supporting the conflict?

FUTURE

Do you think that the educational system should improve its effort in teaching to the young generations a way to get out of all the news and information that appear everyday on social media?

The interview is finished. Do you want to add anything you think are extremely important in regard of these arguments?

I want to thank you very much for your time, your availability and your help. If you want to receive a copy of my dissertation to have a look at my findings you don't have to do anything else than drop me an email and I will be more than happy to share my research with you.

I wish you a wonderful day.

Ciao,

Grazie per aver deciso di prendere parte alla mia ricerca. Apprezzo molto il tempo che mi stai regalando. Voglio ricordarti che la tua partecipazione è totalmente disposta a farlo, e che puoi in qualsiasi momento ritirarla senza darmi una ragione se ti senti a disagio o angosciato o altro. Tutte le informazioni che mi state per fornire tratteranno con la massima riservatezza, e il tuo nome o qualsiasi cosa esplicitamente correlata a te verrà cancellata dalla trascrizione e dalla ricerca, al fine di mantenere il tuo anonimato. Iniziamo con qualche domanda a te, per rompere il ghiaccio e rilassarti.

Come ti chiami?

Quanti anni hai?

Dove sei al momento?

Come ti definisci giornalista? (Che tipo di giornalista sei)

Da quanto tempo sei un giornalista?

Ok grazie mille! Ora è il momento di approfondire i miei oggetti di ricerca. Sai che sto ricercando la relazione esistente tra social media e notizie e informazioni, prendendo come caso di studio l'attacco chimico alla città di Douma del 7 aprile 2018.

MANIPOLAZIONE SOCIAL MEDIA E NEWS

Oggigiorno sempre più persone si affidano ai social media per ottenere informazioni sul mondo e leggere le notizie. Cosa ne pensi riguardo a questo? Come può una persona comprendere l'onestà di ciò che può leggere online? I social media svolgono un ruolo importante nel plasmare l'opinione pubblica?

ATTACCO CHIMICO

Cosa è successo in Siria in relazione al caso di studio? perché? Perché ci sono così tante notizie riguardo a questo evento, non sempre in accordo le une con le altre? Pensi che ci sia un divario tra la situazione attuale in Siria e le notizie riportate nei Paesi occidentali, in particolare in Italia? C'è un'intervista online rilasciata da un giornalista italiano che chiama la guerra civile siriana il "cimitero dell'informazione". Cosa pensi che significhi? È vero?

FALSONE NOVITÀ

Online è possibile leggere sull'attacco chimico e allo stesso tempo leggere che non è mai successo. Da che parte stai? Come può una persona conoscere la verità?

RAZZISMO

La realtà dei social media è il problema?

C'è la possibilità che questa manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica abbia un legame con il razzismo / l'islamofobia? O meglio con la situazione dell'immigrazione che è in fiamme in Europa (soprattutto in Italia) oggi?

Come l'aumento del razzismo in Italia sta sostenendo il conflitto?

FUTURO

Pensi che il sistema educativo dovrebbe migliorare il suo sforzo nell'insegnare alle giovani generazioni un modo per uscire da tutte le notizie e le informazioni che appaiono ogni giorno sui social media?

L'intervista è finita. Vuoi aggiungere qualcosa che ritieni estremamente importante per quanto riguarda questi argomenti?

Voglio ringraziarti per il tuo tempo, la tua disponibilità e il tuo aiuto. Se vuoi ricevere una copia della mia tesi per dare un'occhiata alle mie scoperte non devi fare nient'altro che mandarmi una email e sarò più che felice di condividere la mia ricerca con te.

Ti auguro una splendida giornata.

Health & Safety Risk Assessment for Ethics Applications

RISK ASSESSMENT FORM			
Risk Assessment Reference Number (see link to find out how to obtain this) https://portal.roehampton.ac.uk/information/healthandsafety/Pages/risk-assessment.aspx			
Title of Project	News and Information: the chemical attack in Syria (Douma) as a case study		
Description of activity	Mix methods research: Semi Structured Interviews Content analysis	Date	5th June 2018 14th August 2018
Area/Locations	World Wide Web		
Project team	Name	Job Title	Signed
	Alessandra Valencic	Researcher	Alessandra Valencic
	Caterina Nirta	Supervisor	
Hazards	1. Emotional distress for the researcher 2. Emotional distress for the participants 3. Lone working Etc.		
Who can be harmed?	1. Nobody 2. 3. Etc.		
How can someone be harmed?	1. 2. 3. Etc.		
Number of people affected	6	Rate	H=Hourly, D=Daily, W=Weekly, M=Monthly, Q=Quarterly, S=Six monthly, A=Annually
		D	

Consequence	1. Distress 2. 3. Etc.				
Existing Control Measures	1. Face to face meeting with the supervisor to reduce the distress 2. Participants can withdraw the interviews at any time they feel distress 3. Etc.				
Comments					
Risk rating	VL	VH=Very High, H=High, M=Medium, L=Low, VL=Very Low			
Further possible control measures					
Any further actions required					
Responsible person	Description of hazard	Details of action taken	Date	Completed	
The signatures below confirms that a meeting/discussion has taken place, the Hazard, Risks and appropriate Control measures outlined above have been read and understood.					
Signed (Applicant)		Print Name		Date	
Student Applications Signed (Supervisor/ PI)	Alessandra Valencic	Print Name	Alessandra Valencic	Date	26th May, 2018
Staff Applications Signed (Peer Review)		Print Name		Date	

Appendix 7. Health and Safety Compliance Declaration for Ethics Applications Form



Health and Safety Compliance Declaration for Ethics Applications	
Sponsoring Department	Social Sciences
Title of the Research Project	News and information: the chemical attack in Syria (Douma) as a case study
Applicant	Valencic Alessandra
Who is providing health and safety supervision for this project (DoS/ Supervisor if a Student application; applicant if staff application)	Supervisor Dr. Caterina Nirta
<p>The person providing health and safety supervision must complete the following declaration:</p> <p>(Please tick the box)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I am satisfied that the health and safety hazards and risks associated with this project have been identified and a suitable and satisfactory risk assessment has been conducted to identify the control measures necessary to ensure statutory compliance and compliance with the University health and safety policy. The University Health and Safety office has been consulted and has been provided with an opportunity to comment or provide advice to the project team.</p>	
<p>Risk Assessment Reference Number</p> <p>(see link to find out how to obtain this)</p> <p>https://portal.roehampton.ac.uk/information/healthandsafety/Pages/risk-assessment.aspx</p>	
Date Risk assessment completed and signed	Yes
Is a copy of this risk assessment attached / being submitted with the application?	Yes
<p>Approved by: (DoS or Supervisor if a student application; applicant if a staff application)</p>	Signature: _____
Name, Job Title & Capacity in which signing (DoS/ Supervisor/ Applicant)	
Date	
Comments:	

This is associated with an
Original Application
Amendment

All sections of this form must be completed

(For office Use Only)

Ethics Application Reference:

Date Received by Ethics Officer:

Appendix 8. Feedback Ethics Forms

Ethics form approval

Amanda Holt

Fri 03/08/2018 13:22

To: Alessandra Valencic (Student) <valencia@roehampton.ac.uk>;

Cc: Caterina Nirta <Caterina.Nirta@roehampton.ac.uk>;

Hi Alessandra

I have had a read through of your ethics form. It is unfortunate that you had not completed the Appendix ie the consent form and debrief. Please make sure that your supervisor is happy with these before you continue.

The project can go ahead, but please continue ethical discussions with your supervisor as you proceed, particularly in terms of the specific interview questions that will be asked and the way in which participants were recruited, as these aspects were not particularly clear in the ethics form.

Best wishes
Amanda

Dr Amanda Holt
Reader in Criminology
Dept of Social Sciences
University of Roehampton
London SW15 5SL

Follow me @mcpeople
Follow us @UoR_SSciences

<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/staff/Amanda-Holt/>

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Consider the environment. Please do not print this e-mail unless you really need to.

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