

Lavinia Marin**Functionaries of the Internet: sharing and
posting misinformation online**

Flusser's theory of techno-images described how photography and television were paradigmatic sites of production for the flood of images (Flusser 1984). However, nowadays, the main source of techno-images is the so-called "Internet". Flusser did not write about the online lifeworld which was still in its infancy when he died in 1991, however, his work shows a rich potential for theorising online phenomena such as the flood of techno-images on social media. I find his concepts of the apparatus-functionary complex, techno-images and magical consciousness to be particularly useful for re-framing what it means to propagate misinformation on social media.

Social media is a landfill of images, almost every post has an image attached to it. Furthermore, the texts that do appear on social media oftentimes are engaged with as images. For example, Facebook offers the possibility to post a status as an image: the text appears with a fancy background and the text cannot be copied or edited in any way by other users. In this vast informational medium, misinformation is rampant: it travels faster on social media than via normal channels and it has more visibility (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). It is not well understood why do online users share misinformation so easily without stopping to engage critically with the content they share. Flusser's conceptual toolbox can help us give an account of misinformation by emphasising the central role that techno-images play on social media. For one thing, texts appear as images on our screens - they are actually made of pixels - thus matching the computational dot-particle structure that Flusser relegated to techno-images (Flusser 2011). Because of the very medium of presentation, digital information is hard to engage with in a critical manner because it defies linearity. Secondly, standard metrics for measuring the online propagation of misinformation are based not on beliefs, but on acts. We do not actually know if online users believe what they share on social media as misinformation, especially when they share it without any comment - which is the default mode of doing it. But the online acts of making visible misinformation on social media are small actions - not gestures - of sharing, posting, liking, clicking on and linking back to. These actions are made with one or two clicks of the mouse or touches of the screen, barely involving the intervention of a keyboard or of linear consciousness. The acts which propagate misinformation short-circuit the user's intent and appear as

the paradigmatic actions of a functionary, what Flusser had called *actomes* – very small, bit-like acts (Flusser, 2013, p. 116). Misinformation research thus far assumed that social media users will share only something they believe in. But what if the user’s acts of sharing are simply programmed reactions of functionaries following the instructions of an apparatus?

A Flusserian approach would entail a re-framing entirely the problem of online misinformation by turning it on its head. Misinformation would not be about this or that false statement, but a characteristic of the informational environment in which these statements float and flow forward between users. In such an informational environment, magical consciousness is the dominant mode, effectively stifling users from critical engagement with information. This interpretation is in line with Flusser’s own approach to mediation which was focused on how environments or ambients are created by different media (Echeto 2013, 71). Misinformation online, following a Flusserian reading, is the symptom of an environment filled with techno-images which turn the online users into functionaries of yet another apparatus. Thus, a problem which has been tackled only with the tools of ethics and epistemology, is now framed through aesthetics and by emphasising the experiential signature of misinformation sharing. Flusser's work becomes valuable in helping us see the problem of misinformation with fresh eyes, as a problem of technical mediation and magical consciousness running rampant online.

References

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