

March 2023

# DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN ITALY

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## INTRODUCTION

- The Italian disinformative landscape exploits salient, polarising, and audience-dividing topics. Deceptions are often based on real events and legitimate concerns, which are presented with false, misleading, or inaccurate information. Moreover, the same narratives are cyclically revived to adapt to different crises.
- Disinformation is regularly used as a political communication tool, transmitted and amplified by politicians, especially from far-right and populist alignments.
- The lack of legislation to counter disinformation is concerning. Concerns over limiting freedom of speech and giving authorities excessive power stopped previous attempts at regulation, leaving platforms huge margins of decision.

## EMBLEMATIC CASES

These are three emblematic disinformation cases that permeated Italy's public opinion to this day.

### 2015 TV SHOW DISCUSSING "SUPER VIRUS" CONFUSED FOR COVID-19

In March 2020, a 2015 video from a TV show (TG Leonardo on Rai3) went viral on social media, amplified by politicians such as Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy) and Matteo Salvini (League), who announced an urgent question on the matter. The footage explained that Chinese scientists had manufactured a "super virus" from a "coronavirus surface protein, found in bats" and a "virus that causes acute but not fatal SARS, pneumonia in mice". Although entirely unrelated to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the excerpt fed the [false belief](#) that Covid-19 was a Chinese bioweapon known for years.

### DECADE-LONG GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION AGAINST LAURA BOLDRINI

Former President of the Chamber (2013 - 2018) and current congresswoman, Laura Boldrini has been the most attacked woman on social media in Italy. She was threatened with rape for her positions on migration and mocked for her efforts toward gender equality (e.g., claiming that she prioritised the use of inclusive pronouns over more urgent policies). In the past, League leader [Matteo Salvini](#) called an inflatable doll on stage Boldrini's look alike, and Five Star Movement founder, [Beppe Grillo](#), tweeted, "what would you do in a car with Boldrini?", triggering all sorts of violent and obscene comments.

### DISINFORMATIVE CLICHÉ THAT MIGRANTS RECEIVE 30 EUROS PER DAY

A  [cliché containing false information](#) has permeated Italian society for many years, originating from misinterpreting a call for bids to infrastructures hosting migrants in 2014. The document was amplified by far-right political parties. It stated that, in addition to board and lodging, further expenses (ranging from administrative costs to hygiene products) for the reception of asylum-seekers should not exceed 30 Euros per day per person. Instead, this became viral as "migrants get 30 Euros per day". A deceptive catchphrase that [continues today](#).

# NARRATIVES

The section illustrates the most recurrent narratives in the Italian disinformation landscape.

## POLITICAL POLARISATION

Political polarisation is a central matter in the Italian disinformation landscape, given its extreme fragmentation. It covers general stereotypes associated with the [left and right](#), as well as hoaxes related to specific [events](#), [laws](#), or [doctored opinion polls](#). In this regard, [some politicians](#) often operate as transmitters and amplifiers of false or inaccurate content, which becomes a standard communication tool.

## ECONOMIC DISTRESS AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

A widespread and versatile theme that adapts to different periods consists of denouncing cases of economic crisis, emphasising situations of inequality or corruption. In the former case, fearmongering and sob stories warn about [increasing prices](#), [unexpected taxes](#), or [misallocated wealth](#). In the latter, there is a tendency to over-stress the elite's privilege and detachment from reality or call out "smart guys" who played the system and were able to [claim funds and benefits](#) without really working for it.

## ANTI-MIGRATION AND XENOPHOBIA

As migration is a hot topic in Italy, racist, xenophobic, and migration-related disinformation is always on. For instance, migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers are accused of taking advantage of the [welfare system](#) undeservingly, carrying out [criminal acts](#) (recently targeting Ukrainians fleeing the war), and ultimately failing to integrate by imposing their [cultural and religious heritage](#). Moreover, the debate on reforming the [Italian nationality law](#) is reopened regularly, and met with surges of disinformation.

## COVID-19 CONTAINMENT MEASURES AND VACCINES

The coronavirus pandemic and related [infodemic](#) heavily hit the country. Heterogeneous groups from diverse ideological backgrounds [protested for months](#) against the containment measures and the EU Digital COVID Certificate, organising in Telegram channels with thousands of members. In fact, Italy has a long history of vaccine hesitancy, which the novel coronavirus contributed to amplifying.

## GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION

[Gender-based disinformation in Italy](#) combines attacks against female politicians who are the spokespersons for important civil and human rights battles and efforts to undermine some hard-won civil rights and liberties in the post-war period, as well as undermining confidence in democracy. In particular, a bugbear regards the teaching and imposition of "gender theory" (teoria del gender), a label used to oppose feminism, LGBTQ+, and egalitarian movements, as an alleged conspiracy to erase gender differences, force homosexual behaviour, and even legalise paedophilia.

# COMMUNITY

The main actors countering disinformation in Italy are described hereafter.

## FACT-CHECKERS

- [Facta.news](#), [Pagella Politica](#) (specialised in debunking statements by politicians and parties), [La Voce](#) (focussing on economy-related content), and [Open.online](#) are verified signatories of the [IFCN code of principles](#) and Meta's independent fact-checking partners.
- Other relevant news verifiers are [Bufale.net](#), [BUTAC](#), [Smask.online](#) (exclusively exposing disinformation from the League), [Giornalettismo](#)'s and [PolicyMakerMag](#)'s fact-checking sections.

## GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

- During the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022), the Ministry of Health compiled a [dedicated portal](#) on health-related "fake news".
- AGCOM (the national regulator and competition authority for the communication industries) started an [observatory on online disinformation](#), which has not updated since 2020.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

- Paolo Attivissimo self-describes as an "IT journalist and hoax hunter". He has been a leading actor in the fight against disinformation with his blogs [Il Disinformatico](#) (a wordplay between computer scientist and disinformation) and [Bufalopedia](#) (combining the words hoax and encyclopaedia).
- David Puente is a well-known debunker in the anti-disinformation community. He is currently the [vice-director](#) of Open.online, responsible for its fact-checking project.

# POLICY

In Italy, there is no legal asset worthy of criminal protection that can be identified in the context of disinformation. A different case is when false news causes an offense beyond the truthfulness of the news per se, for instance, in the case of defamation or destabilisation of the public order (which are protected by the penal code).

Overall, [experts](#) warn that the absence of a clear legal framework lets platforms adopt very different and often ambiguous approaches to how they intend to counter disinformation. A relevant example is the [lack of specific platform initiatives](#) around the 2022 general elections, which potentially exposed the country to the influence of malign actors.

Previous attempts to implement regulation failed for fears that they would give authorities too much power, such as the bill to create a legal framework against disinformation and hate speech in 2017 and a protocol for the fight against the spread of fake news via the web during the 2018 general elections. In recent years, the Italian penal code introduced article 612-ter against the illicit dissemination of sexually explicit images or videos (revenge porn) and updated article 612-bis to include formal recognition of cyber-stalking as a crime. The latter constitute minimal legal protection against gender-based disinformation.

This project is funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.