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Executive Summary

The research aims of the SMIDGE project are to provide new insights into an understudied age-group (45-65) and their attraction and vulnerability to conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism on social media. Conspiracy theories and misinformation are issues that, with the advent of a technological society, have become increasingly of interest to scholars and have generated significant alarm (Sassenberg et al., 2023). This attention has increased since 2016, with the spread of misinformation and fake news in the political environment (Lewandowsky, Armaos & Cook, 2022), with the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis (Siani & Green, 2023) and, in the following years, with wars and uncertainty (Olmsted, 2019) and climate change (Sassenberg et al., 2023).

A targeted and particular focus is on middle-aged people, who play a central role in society not only in positions of power, due to an older political and business class (Labiak, 2023), but also in the world of culture and social relations. Through a preliminary literature scoping, this progress report offers a broad overview of current research on misinformation, conspiracy theories and online extremism. First, we examine the sociological understanding of the structural considerations, and the link between misinformation, conspiracy theories and politics, which threatens to pose a danger to democracy. Misinformation and conspiracy theories are not recent phenomena, and the report therefore analyses these phenomena from a range of different perspectives.

SMIDGE's research aims also concerns understanding people's psyche and behaviour. Psychological and medical perspectives suggest several reasons why middle-aged people may be more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and fake news and whilst individual susceptibility varies, several factors contribute to this vulnerability (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). Individuals may also experience information overload due to the rapid expansion of digital and online information sources in recent years. Coping with this influx of information can be overwhelming, making it challenging to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources (Uscinski et al., 2022). In addition, SMIDGE also intends to understand the technological influences on accessing and using the internet. The project therefore seeks to understand the relationship between middle-aged people and

misinformation disseminated on major online platforms. This work also involved an analysis of the ‘digital places’ where the content is present, generated and spread, and to understand how technology and platforms can influence the dissemination of such content.

The use of digital platforms and artificial intelligence tools to feed this ‘market’ of misinformation and conspiracy theories is posing new risks and making the phenomenon increasingly difficult to manage (Floridi, 2017). In such a globalised, digitised and informatised society, it is interesting to dwell on the delicate relationship between the right to freedom of expression and the protection of the public from uninformed, polarised or harmful behaviour and content, focusing on the relationship between misinformation and new artificial intelligence technologies.

Introduction: A preliminary scoping of the interdisciplinary research fields in the SMIDGE-project

This report is a preliminary overview of the diverse and multiple theoretical fields that determine the scope of the SMIDGE project. This initial scoping of the research field provides our ongoing research with a theoretical framework from which to move forward in the subsequent work packages and tasks. SMIDGE is engaging in several large theoretical fields of study including psychology, law, philosophy and technology studies, and a following deliverable due in M35 will offer a more systematic literary review of the interdisciplinary fields we engage with. This will provide a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism on social media of adults aged 45-65.

Conspiracy theories are not, in any sense, a new phenomenon. Rather, conspiracy theories have ancient roots. There are many examples of disinformation throughout history. Some indicate a connection to religion, whilst others were concerned with politics. The earliest evidence of conspiracy theories was during the Peloponnesian War in 431-404 a. C., Thucydides reports on how the Athenians attributed the spread of the pestilence that had struck the city to the invaders, who were accused of polluting the cisterns of Piraeus with poisons. Perhaps the best-known early conspiracy theory is the one that accompanied the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. At that time, mistrust, was erupting into outright religious hatred, towards Christians. It was precisely this climate of mistrust and suspicion of a religious minority, that premised the theory that it was Christians who had set the city on fire, a theory that historians attribute to the emperor Nero himself. Over the centuries, the link between religions and conspiracies has been more evident during catastrophic events, believed to be divine punishments for ‘moral corruption’, for example, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, after which, the Church and many European authorities blamed divine retribution against sinners (Soll, 2016; CITS, 2018). Religious minorities have often been at the center of conspiracy theories, in particular the Jewish people (Dyrendal, Robertson & Aspren, 2018) who have long been accused of being at the center of conspiracies directed at disrupting the world order and controlling society.

Disinformation and misinformation are not solely related to the use of modern technology. With the advent of movable type printing, the dissemination of news became more efficient, and with information, misinformation also found its way through some newspapers. As seen, these phenomena have spanned the centuries, from the French Revolution to Covid-19, throughout the early twentieth century with the Protocol of the Elders of Zion, to aliens and Kennedy assassination. Today, however, conspiracy theories have a new vigour thanks to the spread of information and communication technologies, which are able to transmit news and messages with a speed never seen before. The need to study the mechanisms underlying misinformation and conspiracy theories, which are now increasingly present in the global socio-political context, then becomes evident.

In this document, the research team of the University of Milan aimed to provide a broad scoping document to provide insight into the diverse and wide-ranging topics being considered in the first year of work. The preliminary overview revealed that specific literature on middle-aged persons online is still significantly underdeveloped. Therefore, the preliminary report presented here, has a broader focus on misinformation and conspiracy theories and will be followed by a more in-depth analysis, including a systematic literature review that will be provided, which will analyse the landscape over the next two years and will more specifically aim the focus at those in middle age and the themes being studied in the empirical work.

Methodological considerations

The search strategy employed in the present report, was aimed at gathering a scoping collection of social, political, philosophical, psychological, legal, and technical literature about online extremism and the potentially problematic use of social media by the middle-aged population. The chosen approach was driven by the need to gain a general understanding of the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon.

Step one has been the collection of a wide interdisciplinary spectrum of literature material about online extremism and the malicious use of social media. This first step outlined the boundaries of the review and was facilitated by using a set of ten generic keywords (*disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy, fake news, online extremism, online radicalisation, online hate speech, malicious contents, disinformation campaigns, and counter-narratives*) which were identified through the task T3.1 in WP3.

Step two included the cataloguing of step one findings into the six different research themes: *sociological, political, philosophical, psychological, legal, and technical*. The study of the findings for each topic allowed key references to be retrieved. We focused on literature spanning the years 2016-2023, but literature before this period was also selected when it contributed to inform salient points in each field or provided a key text.

Step three was the segmentation – based on a temporal criterion – of step one findings, as catalogued in step two, and of step two specific findings: 1) the landscape of online extremism and malicious use of social media from 2016 to 2023, and 2) the conspiracy trends emerging during and after the COVID-19 emergency.

Step four filtered the previous results through the lens of the middle-aged population. Such step required the use of demographic targeted keywords, including *middle-age* (in all its linguistic declinations), *45-65 years old individuals*, *generational divide*. The employment of this search strategy enabled the identification of key themes, trends, and gaps in the existing literature. To achieve the goal of each of the previous step, multiple academic databases, and search engines (such as Minerva, Scopus, Google Scholar and others) have been leveraged, to ensure coverage of the available literature, encompassing a diverse range of sources (scholarly articles, academic papers, newspapers, books,



journals) from various disciplines (including sociology, philosophy, psychology, law, communication, political science, media studies and information science).

1.0 Misinformation and Conspiracy theories: a preliminary literary review

In the contemporary socio-cultural context, we are increasingly witnessing the spread of untrue news as well as conspiracy theories, which are widely disseminated because of the use of new media. Of concern is precisely the use of social media platforms to spread fake news, which often ends up polarising discourses towards the expression of hate and racial discrimination (Mittos et al., 2020). The ease of their spreading and the absence of control over the content shared by users raise the need for effectively countering the phenomenon.

Recent studies (Liu, Wu & Chang, 2020; De Oliveira et al., 2023) have shown that there has been an increase in the creation and sharing of fake news among the middle-aged and older people (Brashier & Schacter, 2020; Zhou, Xiang & Xie, 2022; Adams, 2022; Benjamin, 2023). It therefore important to investigate the phenomenon in depth such that a deeper knowledge of the phenomenon could help counter its spread (Marques et al., 2023). Conspiracy theories often overestimate ‘the competence of official actors’ (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), and they can be extreme. However, they can also be subtle, and draw people into more extreme theories and the extent to which people endorse these theories may be contingent upon their political ideology and other demographic factors (Himmelboim et al, 2023). The classical approach to the study of the phenomenon sees the consideration of conspiracy theories as mere examples of misinformation.

What seems to accumulate conspiracy theories is the belief that “truth” is to be sought beyond visible reality, grounded in a climate of suspicion that guides the interpretation of events different from the culturally shared conception of truth. And may appear to have a common narrative that places at the center of its reconstruction of reality, the presence of a secret and powerful elite. Thanks to an intricate initiative directed at harming humanity, and with the aim of maintaining or attaining power, they would be able to control, or even generate, harmful phenomena (such as, for example, the coronavirus), and by deception make the world population believe that such events have a natural origin. Interestingly, the most popular conspiracy theories seem to be developed by utilising the same key elements, i.e., the theme of secrets; the enactment of deception and artifice; and

the presence of hidden goals and purposes directed at controlling the social order (Loukola & Donskis eds, 2022).

Conspiracy theories also seem to appeal to a mistrust of institutions and mainstream media, creating a sense of insecurity and fear that accompanies moments of crisis. This then results in an increasing desire to find a causal link that can enclose events in a frame of meaning. In fact, the idea that a tragic event, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, was the result of a ‘diabolical’ plan devised to the detriment of the world seems more comforting, offering simple solutions for complex issues. Some studies have been conducted regarding the link between cognitive and social factors and the propensity or otherwise to believe, and spread, misinformation and conspiracy theories (Molenda et al., 2023; Green et al., 2023). Indeed, there appears to be multiple psycho-sociological elements underlying the wide spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories among the population (Brichall, 2006; Frenken & Imhoff, 2023) and that the distrust of these ‘others’, may lead to a greater propensity to believe in conspiracy theories (Frenken & Imhoff, 2023).

Through the analysis of misinformation from a historical perspective and adhering to the socio-political context of reference, it emerges for example, how the perspective of the “white race” is elevated and assumed to prevail as the standard to be adopted and propagated for all. This assumption is not an individual racial identity per se, but a fundamental part of larger and historically entrenched systems of power that privileges white perspectives (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Jardina, 2019; Kreiss, 2021). Fears of ‘dangerous’ immigrants appeal to white racial fears. Misinformation campaigns therefore can be successful therefore, because they are an expression of existing inequalities and perceived blame of the ‘other’ (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). These assumptions have been coupled with the migration phenomenon of recent years, which has in turn led to the theory of the Great Replacement finding fertile ground, leading to its increasing popularity. In addition, the policies of welcoming, or appearing to favour the migrant population, are part of a conspiracy created to ‘replace’ not only the political power, but also the culture of white (or indigenous) populations living in the West.

It is easy to understand how this theory has been embraced by the most extremist political wings as the basis for xenophobic statements aimed at marginalising minorities,

pivoting on the fears of citizens and spreading a distorted representation of reality aimed at justifying racist behaviour (Beydoun & Sediqe, 2023; Ekman, 2022; M. Obaidi et al., 2022; Hernandez Aguilar, 2023). Even in the context of the pandemic, in addition to the racist narratives, there were additional xenophobic narratives based on religious sentiment and affecting Muslim populations. Indeed, misinformation having an Islamophobic character claimed that the Muslim population was guilty of 'bioterrorism' (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Among the most recent conspiracy theories to gain traction is the QAnon movement. The term QAnon refers to a conspiracy theory that originated in the United States starting from 2017, due to a series of messages posted by an anonymous user 'Q' on the website 4chan (Miller, 2023, MacMillen & Rush, 2022, Marwick & Clyde, 2022, Enders et al., 2022). According to this theory, there is a system of strong powers, a real deep state, being spread worldwide which include actors and actresses, celebrities, billionaires, and politicians who are perceived to be devoted to pedophilia and the practices of Satanism. It is interesting to note the connection between Donald Trump and QAnon (Cassam, 2023; DiMaggio, 2022).

The narrative of reality proposed by QAnon, includes the former president of the United States lavishing an indefatigable commitment to countering this deep state to expose its plots and to 'drain the swamp', meaning that he intends to remove political opponents and those he perceives to be arbiters of the deep state. Conspiracy theories emerge and develop in socio-political contexts, and moments of political and/or economic crisis, which create fear and concern for the future. For example, Covid-19 and the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation, or climate change denial. This kind of belief has found new life precisely with the pandemic. The rejection of vaccines, as well as medical procedures and initiatives to fight the spread of the virus, have impacted on the methods of counteracting it envisioned by medical institutions and governments.

The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have played a role as a 'catalyst' in developing conspiracy theories by exploiting the population's fears through spreading fake news and misinformation. Although this is often devoid of scientific evidence, it pivots on perceptions of fear in the face of an uncontrollable event (DiMaggio, 2022). As a result, those narratives stating that the virus was created for malevolent purposes or that it is fake, are among the most widespread (Himmelboim et al, 2023). This growth of uncertainty and

fear during the pandemic and adherence to those conspiracy theories was then associated with a disregard for social norms and increased willingness to break laws (Sassenberg et al, 2023). Subsequently, protests against the use of the vaccine and lockdown restrictions occurred worldwide. The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated the creation and spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (DiMaggio, 2022). Where online platforms made it easier the conveyance of correct and useful messages to keep the population informed about the development of the pandemic, likewise, misinformation, also quickly spread, becoming viral (Khan, 2020; Vijaykumar et al., 2021, Bhaman & Sabal, 2020).

Thus, not only did fake news regarding the origin of the virus and its spread, found fertile ground, but also the spread of fake news and misinformation related to treatment methodologies proliferated. This led to the emergence of the ‘no vax’ movement asserting the uselessness, if not outright harmfulness, of anti-covid vaccines (Johne, 2021; A.D. Del Barrio, D. Gatica-Perez, 2023, (Paytubi et al., 2022)). This had a major impact on the response to the pandemic by society and the health institutions involved. Among the conspiracy theories linked to Covid-19 it has been suggested that the spread of Covid-19 had been made possible by the 5G network, which by creating damage to the immune system of the world’s population, would make people more susceptible to infection (Rovazzani, Scarfi & Zeni, 2020) and a claim, that the US administration sought to charge China with violating the international Biological Weapons Convention and ‘having deliberately engineered the coronavirus,’ despite the United States never offered evidence to validate this assertion (DiMaggio, 2022).

The conspiracy theory of the Great Reset also saw a growth in adherents to this idea during and after the pandemic. This theory is based on an initiative presented at the World Economic Forum’s annual summit in 2021. This theory considers that a global elite has manipulated the course of the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to bring forth radical policies aimed at implementing various forms of economic and social control of the population, such as compulsory vaccines, digital identity cards, and even the surrender of property (Christensen & Au, 2023; Cobb, 2023; Witt, 2022; Michie & Sheehan, 2021; Jasper, 2020; Willen, 2023; Meyer & Schwarze, 2021).

The conspiracy theories and misinformation that emerged during the pandemic years were not only many and varied, but they adapted quickly and thus explained the pandemic to the wider population. For example, within the QAnon narrative, claiming that the coronavirus had been created in laboratory and intentionally disseminated and used as a biological weapon by the deep state (DiMaggio, 2022; Miller, 2023, MacMillen & Rush, 2022, Marwick & Clyde, 2022, Enders et al., 2022, McCright et al., 2016, Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020). The dissemination of the Covid-19 conspiracy theories seems to have acted as a catalyst for new and developing conspiracy theories, not only by enriching the narrative of those that were already widespread.

It is perhaps understandable that catastrophic natural events can generate fear, concern and the desire to find a rational and simple explanation of what are often complex and multi-faceted phenomena. Conspiracy theories denying climate change are increasingly appearing on social media. Among them is the claim that a powerful elite are altering global temperature data to extreme levels, to generate terror and elicit control over the population. In recent times, a narrative characterized by climate change denialism found increasing popularity through online platforms, as people experience more frequent extreme weather phenomena and are looking for a simple explanation that does not include acknowledgement of human influenced climate change. Among the various platforms (Twitter(X), Facebook, Telegram etc.) messages are spreading, even among political figures, that deny the existence of a climate emergency. This kind of content therefore contributes to the creation of an ideology that conveys fake news and conspiracy theories for political advantage. Despite the increasing growth of these theories, political actions to counter this phenomenon often fail to be implemented effectively. This is despite the evidence that misinformation and conspiracy theories can have a negative effect in societies, spreading and promoting racist, extremist ideologies, inciting crime, hindering measures directed at protecting public health as well as slowing down efforts to counter climate change (Sassenberg et al., 2023).

The connection with the political sphere is both important and concerning and recent studies have been aimed at highlighting the role of the spread of conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies, pointing out their connecting elements and possible consequences within the political realm (Almiron & Xifra, 2019; Wong-Parodi, 2020; Rubin,

2016; McCright, 2016, Fessmann, 2019, Dunlap & Jacques, 2013, Farham, 2017). Currently there is no consensus among scholars regarding the underlying causes of belief in conspiracy theories and the relationship between age and misinformation (Wyle et al., 2014; Brasheir & Schacter, 2020), which the SMIDGE project is starting to address. For example, the spread of misinformation during the U.S. presidential election via Twitter(X) accounts was examined (Grinberg et al 2019) and found that exposure to and sharing of fake news by registered voters on Twitter and found that engagement with fake news sources was extremely concentrated amongst a small number of individuals. Only 1% of individuals accounted for 80% of fake news source exposures, and 0.1% accounted for nearly 80% of fake news sources shared. The study also found that individuals most likely to engage with fake news sources were conservative leaning, older, and highly engaged with political news (Grinberg et al., 2019).

There have been several studies dedicated to the relationship between Covid-19. A recent study on the middle-aged migrant population residing in Brazil and Portugal (De Oliveira et al, 2023; Ruspini, 2009) found that analysis on the selected sample (304 participants) showed how more than half of them agreed with at least one piece of fake news among those indicated to them, and believing at least one piece of misinformation (De Oliveira et al., 2023). However, again, the issue of the spread of such fake news by specific demographics is still little explored (Loomba et al., 2021; Van der Linden, 2022). The analysis of the middle-aged in this context has been largely ignored in studies of the phenomenon and SMIDGE's objective is to bridge that knowledge gap to understand the vulnerability to misinformation and conspiracy theories in the middle-aged demographic.

2.0 Sociological perspectives

This chapter considers the sociological perspectives of conspiracy theories, misinformation narratives and extreme views prevalent on social media platforms. Although their factual basis is often rather questionable, and their thinking often irrational, it is often not possible to directly refute their assertions as it is almost impossible to find evidence that something did not happen. However, conspiracy discourses seem to represent a significant indicator of the state of public debate (Lewandowsky, Armaos & Cook, 2022).

It is crucial to develop a sociological understanding of the structural conditions associated with conspiracy narratives, focusing on the socio-psychological processes and social conditions that underlie such beliefs. Indeed, social conditions associated with insecurity or threat in the sociological and political environment, unemployment, political change and demographic shifts are associated with an increase in conspiracy ideation (DiGrazia, 2017). Reid (Reid, 2010) defines conspiracy theories as an attempt to explain that harmful or tragic events are, in fact, the result of the actions of a small group of powerful people. However, we would posit that from a sociological point of view, it is necessary to extend this definition to include events that are not considered tragic or harmful such as those who believe that the earth is flat. A conspiracy theory therefore can be identified as an explanation of an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups, often politically motivated, when other explanations are more likely (Enders & Smallpage, 2018).

Initially, conspiracy theories were considered a mere pathology (Fenster, 2008), which was believed to attribute to particular agents a great ability to influence personal and collective decisions, to predict the consequences of actions, to keep strategies secret and to coordinate in a way that goes far beyond what is realistic in an open society. Thanks to the widespread dissemination of misinformation and extremist and conspiracy narratives through social media, the discourse has become more profoundly articulated (Butter & Knight, 2020). In this way, there is a greater tendency to assume that complex social phenomena are the result of an intentional strategy, devised by hyper-rational and omnipotent actors. This is despite the availability of information that considers more

plausible options. It may be that these plausible options are derived from unintended consequences and triggered by a multiplicity of decisions made by rational but ‘short-sighted’ individuals, guided by conflicting goals (Popper, 2012).

From a sociological perspective, the potential social causes of conspiratorial beliefs are examined by considering the role of individuals’ perceptions and interpretations of their social environment, and which then leads to polarised and conspiratorial beliefs (Sullivan, Landau & Rothschild, 2010; Van Prooijen, Spadaro & Wang, 2021). In this way, complex issues and concerns are projected as being the fault of a single individual or group to whom they attribute immense power. This in turn enables them to consider that they can understand the source of the threat (DiGrazia, 2017) and to focus blame on a specific group or individual. The issues of immigration are a case in point.

Inter-group conflict (Seth, 2021) provides some insight into the belief in conspiracy theories. The need to find the ‘other’ to blame is particularly attractive to those who consider their personal problems to be derived from e.g., immigration policies or what is perceived as the curbing of free speech and ‘wokeness’. As a result, these groups begin to feel the need to protect their identity and they may start to believe negative stories about other groups, as the stories reinforce preconceived biases and prejudices, to identify the perpetrator of their community’s problems (Greenaway et al., 2020). Another key aspect to believing in conspiracy theories and misinformation is education level (Jolley & Douglas, 2017). For example, People with a university degree were less likely to believe misinformation about COVID-19 and more likely to trust preventive measures than those without a university degree (Siani & Green, 2023) and may lead to individuals with inadequate levels of scientific and digital literacy proliferating and spreading scientific misinformation.

What this indicates is that education, and in particular, digital literacy, plays a decisive role in the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories. The ability to access and critically evaluate information is essential for democracy and active citizenship and, in a digitised society, there is a strong need for training, especially for middle-aged adults who are not the digital natives of younger people, but who are often neglected by the education system. According to the *Eurostat report Aging Europe – looking at the lives of older people in the EU (November 2023)*, it is possible to draw a detailed picture of the

everyday life of older people in the EU. The report indicates that learning is no longer confined to the younger years spent at school, college and/or university, but has become a dynamic process covering all stages of life. The research in the EU-27, found that around 1 out of 16 people between the ages of 55 and 64 have participated in education and training programmes, although the figures for the SMIDGE project demographic (45-65) is not indicated specifically, the indications are that the majority of older people are unlikely to engage with education, resulting in an ever growing generational digital divide in terms of access to and use of information and communication technologies including mobile phones, personal computers, laptops, tablets, the internet and related services.

The gender dimension is also more evident in studies of middle-aged and older people. The annual *EU survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals* indicates that older adults are generally closing the digital divide but remain relatively slow in adopting new technologies. Older men tend to be more likely than older women to use digital technologies, and this may be related to the fact that older men may have been more exposed to new technologies in the workplace (due to their choice of occupation or simply because a higher percentage of men than women work). These gender differences may explain, at least in part, why ICT use declines in the middle-age groups (a development amplified by the fact that women account for a much larger share in this age group). In contrast, among younger generations there is no evidence of a gender digital divide; for example, almost all young people, male and female, use the internet daily. Whilst younger generations may find it difficult to imagine life without a smartphone or a personal computer/laptop, in the EU-27 in 2017 a quarter (25%) of people aged 55-64 had never used a computer. Given that a higher percentage of older people have never used a computer or have recently used the Internet, it is not surprising that older people tend to have fewer digital skills. In 2019, almost a third (31%) of the EU-27 adult population possessed more than basic digital skills: the percentages for older people were much lower, with 16% for those aged 55-64.

The use of technology, educational levels and perceptions of personal identity therefore are key in understanding the likelihood and vulnerability to belief in conspiracy theories, and that this may have potentially deleterious social and political consequences (Jolley & Douglas, 2013; Kull, Ramsay & Lewis, 2010; Van Prooijen, Spadaro, Wang,

2022). Digitisation, and globalisation have enabled an unprecedented spread of narratives and counter-narratives about a wide range of topics. The internet, and specifically, social media, plays a decisive role in the gathering of momentum and facilitating the dissemination and sharing of unfounded and conspiratorial content.

In these terms, it appears that future events are likely to highlight the same dynamics as those revealed during the Covid-19 pandemic such that; the event or crisis breaks out; unfounded and uninformed content begins to circulate; new conspiratorial narratives are constructed and spread; and social stratification, conflict and polarisation of views becomes mainstream.

The work of governments and institutions is therefore crucial to overcome the proliferation and reasons for conspiracy theories and misinformation gaining so much traction online and within communities. Using empirical evidence (such as gained through the SMIDGE project activities), governments and institutions can make effective policy and operate in a prudent and transparent manner. They can stimulate greater education policies for all demographics and provide accurate (and fact-checked) information through official channels to encourage the dissemination of scientifically grounded and demonstrable knowledge and counter-narratives. The use of media literacy training, particularly of those non digital natives over 45, can improve digital resilience and provide the ability to reflect and discern more accurately between fake and real news, information and misinformation, truth from fiction.

3.0 Political Perspectives

An aspect of interest for the SMIDGE project are the interrelationships between misinformation, conspiracy theories and political ideologies and that conspiracy theories are a manifestation of vulnerability that arises when social motive meets political expediency (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). An analysis of conspiracy theories from these perspectives highlights how conspiracy theories and misinformation have been used as political propaganda and among extremist ideologies (Cassam, 2023). The ability to use fake news and to disseminate misinformation to try to manipulate public opinion, not only to steer its vote, but sometimes also having the intention to safeguard the *status quo*, by diverting attention from for example, critical socio-economic issues in favour of a channeling a citizens' attention towards some alleged external threat, or to stir up outrage against political opponents, still accompanies politics today (Rhodes-Purdy, 2023). Whilst all political wings, right, left and centre, will have encountered conspiracy theories and misinformation, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the incidence of alignment to the far-right (Hardy, 2023; Cassam, 2023, DiMaggio, 2022; Adamczyk et al., 2014). With the advancing consensus in Europe for right-wing political alignments and increasing support for extremism, it can be understood how the spread of politically motivated misinformation can be a cause for concern and how therefore a counter strategy is needed to increase the capacity for critical thinking and discernment among citizens (DiMaggio, 2022; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Gounari, 2022; Hardy, 2023; Becker, 2019).

The spread of fake news and misinformation in the political context could be a harbinger of particularly damaging and, in extremis, even dangerous consequences for democracy (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). An example of the dangers of disinformation on the democratic discourse and hence political democracy was on January 6th, 2021, at United States Capitol Building, in Washington D.C, USA. A group of supporters of Donald Trump, stormed the Capitol building to contest the outcome of the presidential election, which was won by Joe Biden (DiMaggio, 2022; Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, Warren, 2023; Papaioannou, Pantazi & Van Prooijen, 2023). This incident, well documented on social media, is a clear early warning of how a distorted narrative and the spread of fake news can also pose real risks to democracy itself. The group that stormed the Capitol included

believers in QAnon theories, to which as indicated earlier, Donald Trump is known to have connections.

In the political arena, one can therefore understand the great danger that misinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories can pose to liberal and democratic thought (Warren, 2023; Muirhead, Rosenblum, 2019; Rhodes-Prudy, 2023; Papaioannou, Patanzi, Van Prooijen, 2023). The instrumentalization of a narrative of reality that pivots on misinformation, used to the detriment of a political opponent, could, as seen on Jan 6th, 2021, led to active physical violence, as well as ‘steering’ the vote by discrediting opposing political viewpoints (Suhav, Grofman, Trechsel, 2020; Hardy, 2023; Thorleifsson, 2021; Rogers, 2021). At election campaign time, there has been a significant growth and spread of misinformation campaigns directed at influencing citizens in how they cast their votes (Loveless, 2021). Recent examples include the UK Brexit campaign in 2016, in which misinformation on social media became widespread (Marshall and Drieschova 2018), and the spread of misinformation about President Obama, regarding his country of birth (Riedl et al., 2022).

We are thus witnessing the use of fake news and conspiracy theories, within political dynamics, as a weapon capable of polarizing discourse and negatively influencing voters, often pivoting on emotional states (Loveless, 2021) and to attack the foundations of pluralism, and democracy (Rogers, 2021). The links between misinformation and modern politics affect all nations (Zehring, Domahidi, 2023; Deutschmann, Herlth, Woldan, 2020; Schulze et al., 2022; Caiani, Susánszky, 2021). The 23-day occupation of the New Zealand parliament is one example. In February-March 2022, a group of citizens, including members of extremist fringes, protested about Covid-19 vaccines and occupied the parliament building. The uprising was fueled by a disinformation campaign centered on conspiracy theories circulated by New Zealand activist media such as Counterspin (Jovanovski, 2018; Robie, 2022; Clark, 2022). Messages against the ruling political side, began to spread, along with white supremacist ideologies, on social media (Rogers, 2021; Thorleifsson, 2021).

Another example is the 2018 referendum in Macedonia, which was held to decide the name of North Macedonia, which would later be followed by membership in the European Union and NATO. During the popular consultation, there was a flood of disinformation campaigns spread through social networks, and bots specifically created to

spread the hashtag #bojkotiram i.e. boycott the referendum, and against the ethnic Albanian minority, who were in favour of the yes vote (Denkovski, 2020, Livini, 2018). Despite the high percentage of support (91%), the turnout (36.9%) was well below the threshold to make the referendum result binding. These examples highlight how misinformation campaigns, and conspiracy theories, can have real power to polarize political discourse and impact on outcomes of the democratic decisions of the electorate (Suhav, Grofman & Trechsel, 2020; Warren, 2023; Rogers, 2021).

4.0 Religious perspectives

Conspiracy theories have long been used to link political and social struggles with theological beliefs. For example, the creation of a link between demonic enemies and reality, to construct a conspiratorial narrative of one's political opponents has been a common theme over the centuries. For example, the schism following the Protestant Reformation (the Pope as Antichrist, reformers as heretics, and Catholic priests as pagan idolaters), or in struggles between religious groups and secular states (Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018). A special link therefore seems to emerge between misinformation, conspiracy theories and religious sentiment. It may be that religions and conspiracy theories are both based on unprovable 'truths' and membership of specific 'in' groups. The similarities in the patterns of thought, ideological approaches and the historical complex connections with political power dynamics (Butter, 2014; Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018) means that throughout history there has been an intersection between political ideology, conspiracy theories and religious sentiment. Religious groups who are the ruling elite, are just as likely to use narratives pivoting on fake news and misinformation to ensure the maintenance of their power as are other political actors. Religious groups may also be subject to conspiracy theories and misinformation where a disenfranchised out-group is stigmatised by an empowered majority group (Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018). Alternatively, a religious group may cast itself as an out-group, and launch its own counter-epistemic claims against the perceived hegemony and claim its own space and power (Dyrendal, 2003; Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018).

The relationship between religion and misinformation does not always have negative connotations, as exponents of a religious belief can act to counter the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Dyrendal, 2003; Yahya, 2007; Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018). For example, when some Nigerian Islamist activists were spreading conspiracies about polio vaccines in the early 2000s, their opponents enlisted the authority of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and established Muslim scholars to combat the fake news and encourage the take-up of the vaccine (Yahya, 2007; Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018). The seminal study by Festinger et al (Festinger, Riecken., Schachter, 1956) noted how individuals and groups develop strategies to reduce the cognitive dissonance

between their beliefs in prophecies and the contradiction they have with factual reality. In some cases, believers impute the failure of the prophecies in which they believe to the work of a conspiracy and may spread the narrative of sabotage by an unspecified group (Zeller, 2014; Robertson, 2013; Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018). The similarities with the behaviour of those who spread conspiracy theories, and who believe in the stories and misinformation are interesting, as both use cognitive dissonance to only recognise those aspects that fit with their world view.

In the religious context, conspiracy theories are also being spread within one religion and target the believers of another. The recent examples of Myanmar and Sri Lanka concerning Buddhist majorities backed by state power targeting Muslim minorities are cases in point. These minorities are cast as global existential threats using conspiracy theories and misinformation (Dyrendal, Robertson & Asprem, 2018). These theories can originate outside religious traditions as well, including the spread of conspiracy theories to confuse the Palestinian Arab masses with social problems, such as violence and crime, in order to deflect, neutralize and take their attention away from important national issues in the Palestinian territory, before the outbreak of armed conflict (Riedl et al., 2022; Ali, 2023). As new technologies including social media have taken a central role in the spread of conspiracy theories, the platforms exploit the religious hierarchies that are present in each historical-geographical context (Equality Labs, 2019).

Jewish people (Shaheed, 2019) have been particularly subject to conspiracy theories and misinformation in social media networks and online more generally. For example, the attack on the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue on 27 October 2018, was carried out by a person who had used the social media platform Gab to spread antisemitic communication prior to committing the atrocity (McIlroy-Young & Anderson, 2019; Riedl et al., 2022). Social media platforms thus seem to be particularly effective means of spreading anti-semitic hate speech (Zannettou et al., 2020; Ozalp et al., 2020). To protect their corporate image and their users, some platforms have in recent years tried to implement policies and systems, sometimes even automated ones, that act as moderators of the content posted by users (Roberts, 2019) to limit certain types of speech (Gillespie, 2018; Nurik, 2019), especially hate speech and anti-Semitic speech which is particularly violent

and spreads very quickly online (Riedl et al., 2022; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019; Shaheed, 2019; Zannettou, 2020).

Platforms such as Twitter(X) (Riedl et al., 2022) Telegram and some video games operate in a way that seems to incite users and players towards racial hatred and extremism (Ingersoll & Anti-Defamation League, 2020). The most consistent predictor of discrimination against Jews by both governments and society is the proportion of a country's population which believes in conspiracy theories of Jewish power and control over society, the economy, the media, and politics (Fox & Topor, 2021). Christian nationalists tend to believe in more antisemitic tropes, primarily because of their investment in the social dominance of Christians. However, their antisemitism is part of a broader set of negative views toward all minorities (Dennen & Djupe, 2023). Interestingly, evangelization activities fulfill the need for belonging and a sense of sacred purpose, which can somewhat counter the fear of loss of white social status, patriarchal authority and traditional hierarchy, and may explain the allure of conspiracy theories such as QAnon for conservative Christians (Cooper-White, 2023).

5.0 Philosophical perspectives

One can understand how philosophical studies on the subject are particularly helpful in arriving at a greater understanding of conspiracy theories and the motivations of adherents. Far from the view that a prima facie skepticism towards conspiracy theorists was justified, because they have an irrational tendency to continue to uphold their theory, due to a pervasive effect of the fundamental error of attribution (Clarke, 2002), the philosophical study of the subject devotes more attention to the modes of reasoning behind the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation rather than the societal impact per se but, comparing the argumentative modes of conspiracy theorists, it has emerged how they have no less rigorous evidentiary standards than those who wish to support any theory that is not conspiratorial. Indeed, it emerged that there is no evidence cited in support of conspiracy theories that is not also routinely found in support of theories that are not considered conspiracy (Dentith, 2019). While it is evident that some conspiracy theories make use of spurious or fallacious beliefs, it is necessary to study the subject in a rigorous and serious manner by also investigating the psychological and sociological aspects, so as to be able to identify the characteristic traits that underlie the belief and dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories, and will be the subject of a systematic examination in the following deliverable.

6.0 Psychological Perspectives

The psychology of individuals and groups play important roles in the study of misinformation, extremism and conspiracy theories, and attempting to understand their mechanisms and identify factors that may influence an individual's tendency to embrace these beliefs and facilitate their spread. The relationship between psychology, misinformation, extremism and conspiracy theories encompasses a wide range of aspects and complexities, and several psychological factors may contribute to the adherence to these ideologies. Indeed, misinformation content and conspiracy theories often offer a simple narrative that can generate an apparent sense of control.

The socio-cognitive factors associated with conspiracy thinking are important and the use of infodemics, religious fatalism, political distrust combined with mistrust in mainstream media may affect and negatively influence an individual's psychological well-being. By amplifying the likelihood of emotional and non-rational reasoning, and a diminished perception of socio-political control by fueling social polarisation and disorder and undermining trust in democratic institutions. Among the various factors, the impact of age on belief in misinformation and polarisation of ideologies generates wide-ranging reflections and yet whether older adults or younger individuals are more susceptible to disinformation remains to be fully investigated (Oliveira et al., 2023), but to which the SMIDGE project will contribute.

Generally, the explanations from which conspiracy theories are drawn are not supported and accompanied by scientific evidence. Such theories often emerge in times of crisis, when people seek simple and conclusive explanations for complex events, offering an alternative narrative that seems to make sense of events and identify those responsible. Conspiracy thinking may be based on extreme skepticism, leading to the rejection of notions that are not in line with established beliefs, forcing an interpretation of the facts that supports this world view, without verifying or questioning the choices made (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). Although a small number of these theories may later prove to be true, the way in which their belief is justified remains inadequate (Kovic & Föchslin, 2018).

Psychology attempts to explain conspiracy theories and the reasons for their widespread diffusion in society by investigating possible combinations of motivation and personality traits (Liekfett, Christ & Becker, 2021). Indeed, belief in conspiracy theories may be related to certain psychological traits or conditions that may influence the tendency to believe in these narratives (Van Prooijen, 2022). Conspiracy theories often have common characteristics: the base, i.e. a group of people, towards whom they are directed and from whom the plan of action is expected to be carried out; and the secrecy of the plan; with the consequent harmful effects on those from whom it is kept secret (Zonis & Joseph, 1994).

Most conspiracy theories feature groups to whom power is attributed, be they political groups, economic elites, religious groups or specific industries, such as the pharmaceutical industry. It is possible therefore to frame the fundamental psychological dynamics that underlie the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and accompany their evolution. In this way, conspiracy theories can be associated with an accompanying desire for social 'status' (De Vincentiis, 2020). They may feel the need to adhere to occult and/or secret narratives without verifying their authenticity, as their social status within their 'in' group being likely threatened should they question the veracity of the conspiracy theory. Where frustration with daily life and perhaps a lack of status leads to a loss of self-esteem, and involvement within a self-reinforcing group, where they have high visibility and perceived high status can be very attractive. Adherence to conspiracy theories seems to be driven by the need to give meaning to confused or poorly understood events, by providing an alternative explanation that offers security and a sense of control. Sometimes, belief in conspiracy can be sign of a psychological illness and can highlight a persecutory dynamic within the group, based on suspicion and distrust of others who also have paranoid traits. This is also accompanied by a need for belonging and the superiority of knowing something others do not. Social identity, in these terms, plays a significant role.

The profile of the conspiracy theorist reflects a logic of thought, defined by Popper, as self-immunising: 'I believe in something, I don't find the proof, here is the proof that it is true, and they want to hide it' (Popper, 1945). These people can present with dysfunctional or problematic personalities and delusional-like modes of reasoning, in which a belief, once ingrained, is never reasoned out even in the face of logical and objective evidence of facts (Galbraith, 2022). But belief in conspiracy can also be considered to be a defence

mechanism. When an individual is faced with a feeling of fear, they may look for ways to control the unknown, attributing an identity to it or attempting to identify and neutralise it. They may try to protect themselves from the effects of chance, natural events, epidemics and so on, to manage and negate their feelings of fear. From this analysis it can be considered that belief in conspiracy is largely a dysfunctional way of being, on the one hand accompanied by a distorted lifestyle and, on the other hand, by a feeling of superiority and omnipotence, oriented, first and foremost, towards deceiving oneself and others which makes them a risk for the community since they may be able to influence those who also share the same narrative or vision, to make dangerous choices (Cinelli et al., 2020). Belief in conspiracy theories can be explained by predispositions, worldviews and identities that precede the adoption of specific beliefs. This perspective tends to give less weight to causal exposure to misinformation as an explanation of conspiracy theory beliefs or associated behaviours (Sassenberg et al., 2023). However, other explanations consider conspiracy theories to be like a virus (e.g. an infodemic) (Zarocostas, 2020) which spreads from person to person, starting with exposure and then leading to beliefs and action (Uscinski et al., 2022). Knight, 2003 focused on the political, social and psychological motivations and origins of people who support conspiracy theories. It emerged that the number of existing theories is extremely high and there are competing and contradictory conspiracy theories even in explaining the same event. In the United States, the belief that there was a conspiracy behind Kennedy's assassination is extremely widespread; however, it has been estimated that around forty different groups have been accused of being responsible for his death.

It is also possible to identify stable and constant elements in individuals who support conspiracy theories. A positive correlation emerged, for example, between openness to experience (such as strong imagination or intellectual curiosity) and authoritarianism, distrust of authority and cynicism (Abalakina-Paap et al., 2022) (Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013) (Darwin & Neave, 2011) (Swami & Furnham, 2014) (Wagner-Egger & Bangerter, 2007). A negative correlation was found with the level of distrust towards others, self-esteem and the tendency towards cooperation and friendliness (Goertzel, 1994) (Wagner-Egger & Bangerter, 2007). Further, exposure to conspiracy narratives and the possibility of encountering such narratives can increase the

level of adherence to conspiracy theories (Douglas, Van Prooijen & Sutton, 2021). Another suggestion is that some people have a propensity towards ‘conspiratorial thinking’ or a general ‘conspiracy mentality’ (Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013) (Imhoff, Bruder, 2014). With this mindset, individuals who embrace one set of conspiracy theories or extremes tend to also believe in other, albeit unrelated, theories (Wood, Douglas & Sutton, 2012).

People may also be inclined to believe in conspiracy theories due to a combination of their personality traits and their motivations which may include financial or political gain, or a desire to feel valued or special to satisfy their motivational needs (Molenda et al., 2023). It is therefore necessary to examine the two essential factors in parallel: personality and motivation (Bowes, Costello & Tasimi, 2023). Data from 170 studies involving a sample of almost 160,000 people from the United States, the United Kingdom and Poland were examined (Bowes, Costello & Tasimi, 2023). Through a meta-analytical review of motivational and personality correlations, overall, it emerged that the strongest correlates concerned: i) the perception of danger and threat; ii) reliance on intuition; ii) acting with superiority. People are driven to adhere to the theories by the need to understand and feel safe in their environment, as well as the desire to perceive one’s own community as superior to others, although the need to exert control did not prove to be a predominant motivator in supporting such theories, emerging instead as a tendency to rely on specific theories driven by relational dynamics and focused on concrete events (Bowes, Costello & Tasimi, 2023).

All people have potential and limitations when it comes to reasoning and Suzuki & Yamamoto, 2020 found that individuals tend to reach conclusions without thorough analysis, perform many everyday actions without thinking, creates beliefs based on stereotypes, and makes decisions according to cognitive biases, which are constructs derived from misperceptions, from which judgements, prejudices and ideologies are inferred and individuals tend to make their decisions using a limited number of heuristics (an unconscious, intuitive, and hasty mental process that leads to a quick and simple conclusion through minimal effort) rather than sophisticated rational processes. (Gilovich, Griffin & Kahneman, 2022). Whilst this approach may work well in many areas of human life, there is a risk of producing systematic biases in judgement leading to flawed decision-

making. Biases, in fact, are forms of ineffective heuristics that alter the perception of events and, as they are not generated on real data, are acquired a priori without criticism or foundational support.

- It has been suggested that there is a relationship between cognitive biases and belief conspiracy theories i.e.,
- proportionality bias: tendency to assume that events of great importance must be matched by equally significant causes;
- attributional bias: tendency to overestimate the effect of internal, stable characteristics of an individual and underestimate the influence of situational factors;
- confirmation bias: tendency to select information that is consistent with one's beliefs and to ignore or downplay information that is inconsistent with them;
- conjunction fallacy: violation of the laws of probability that can be described as the tendency to overestimate the probability of joint events and underestimate the probability of disjoint events. (Brotherton & French, 2014).

However, an evolutionist approach (Van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018) considers that the propensity towards conspiracy beliefs is the result of natural selection processes to be continually on the alert for dangers perceived or real. The propensity towards conspiratorial beliefs in this analysis is therefore nothing more than a by-product of other psychological mechanisms that have developed throughout the history of our species, because they entailed an evolutionary advantage. Indeed, evolution has provided human beings with enormous capacities for reasoning, thinking and communication. In particular, there are certain cognitive processes that may have given rise, as a 'side effect', to the universal tendency to believe in conspiracies (Casara, 2021), such as the ability to identify or create patterns (Mattson, 2014), and to recognise (Baron-Cohen, 1997) and manage threats (Neuberg, Kenrich & Schaller, 2011). According to this approach, conspiracy narratives do not have an objective adaptive utility of their own; instead, they are the secondary outcome of other adaptive functions.

Humanity has proven adaptable towards dangerous situations. A greater propensity to believe in conspiracy narratives is comparable to the feeling of caution against a broad spectrum of threats and dangers in the environment. Conspiracy theories therefore promise to satisfy certain motivational needs, epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of oneself and one's social group) (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka, 2017). Events and phenomena are often the result of a network of factors and of a genuine epistemic need that responds to the desire to provide simple answers and effective solutions for complex events and mechanisms.

Among the epistemic motivations that causal explanations can satisfy is the gratification of curiosity when information is not available; the reduction of uncertainty and bewilderment when available information is conflicting; the search for meaning when events seem random and the defence of disconfirming beliefs (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka, 2017). Based on this view, conspiracy theories arise and grow stronger in the aftermath of periods of crisis, of epidemics and major social changes (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Conspiracy theories promise to satisfy a further need, the existential need, namely the feeling of feeling safe in their environment and exercising control as autonomous individuals and as members of a collective. Such narratives can offer security in the face of threatening situations, in which one experiences psychological stress or anxiety, which humans tend to avoid. (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017)

Finally, the role of the social environment in which the individual is embedded must be considered. The individual, by nature, needs to maintain a positive image of themselves and their groups (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka, 2017). The human cognitive system is particularly adept at justifying its own shortcomings, justifying its own failures and minimizing the merit of others' achievements. From this perspective, conspiracy theories are an attempt to respond defensively to the need to justify a lack of power and control by blaming, instead, those who hold it. Belief in such narratives therefore is associated with feelings of alienation, narcissism, in particular, collective narcissism, and the idea of the superiority of one's own group, combined with the belief that others do not appreciate it enough (Cichocka et al., 2016). From this perspective, conspiracy theories tend to undermine social economic and political arrangements and incite people to perceive

themselves as valuable members of morally upright collectives (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka, 2017).

However, the analysis does not prove that conspiracy beliefs satisfy these needs. Indeed, conspiratorial beliefs do not reduce, and sometimes there is an increase in, anxiety, aversion to uncertainty and feelings of existential threat (Liekfett, Christ & Becker, 2021). Moreover, although experiences of social exclusion may increase conspiracy beliefs, relying on such theories does not restore the need to belong; on the contrary, such narratives make people vulnerable to stigmatization and predict social rejection (Van Prooijen et al., 2021).

The relationship between ageing and misinformation reveals that older adults, particularly those over 60, show a greater vulnerability than other demographic groups. This includes a lower ability to remember the source of original information and a greater reliance on false memories, making them more prone to misinformation and belief bias (Oliveira et al., 2023). During the 2016 US elections, cognitive deficits were cited as the main cause of adults' vulnerability to misinformation content and fake news. Several factors have emerged that are crucial for understanding the mechanism that leads an adult subject to rely on this type of narrative. Older adults may forget details about the source of information which suggests that fact-checks may fade from memory, while original misinformation still seems to remain fluent (Mitchell & Johnson, 2009). Dual-process theories of ageing pit fluency (familiarity) and recollection against each other, with the consequent risk of ignoring an aspect of memory that improves with age: general knowledge (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). In addition, older adults tend to reject statements that contradict their knowledge, even when these falsehoods seem fluent, sticking more to what is already present in their own cognitive background (Brashier et al., 2017). Further, it has been shown that there is a greater tendency of older adults to trust uninformative health-related content to avoid health risks than to doubt it (Zhou, Xiang & Xie, 2023).

Whilst the above studies on older people are valuable to provide some insight, none of the research has provided findings that relate to the 45-65 middle-aged group. This demographic has little in common with the retired and oldest people in society, and yet research continues to put all over 50's into this one category. The work of SMIDGE aims to bridge the gap in understanding the behaviours and motivations of the middle aged and their vulnerability to misinformation and conspiracy theories.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars focused on social media exposure, limited supervision, control and regulation and correlations between the use of social media or particular media sources and a tendency towards certain types of behavior or beliefs, including support for political violence and criminal behavior, established a causal relationship between exposure, which is likely to promote beliefs, and promoting and incentivizing deleterious behaviour (Uscinski et al., 2022). In order to better understand the causal relationship with social media it is necessary to consider that behaviour is mainly – but not exclusively – motivated by psychological and social factors and underlying political ideologies (Jolley, Mari & Douglas, 2020) Although accidental exposure may be the first approach between the user and a theory, people can maintain significant control over their information environment. The main purpose of service providers is to satisfy user demands by proposing content in line with the user’s already shown preferences and interests.

Algorithms have less influence than one might a priori assume (Hosseinmardi et al., 2021), assuming, rather, a more relevant role in the subsequent phase of the polarization of ideology, rather than in the initial reception of content. People, in fact, tend to select information that coincides with their own identity and ideologies and to reject counter-narratives that may be contrary or that may allow for critical thinking. The epistemic disadvantages of conspiracy theories do not, in fact, seem to be immediately apparent to people who lack the motivation or ability to reason rationally and critically. This reinforces the assumption that the tendency to rely on conspiracy theories is related to lower levels of analytical thinking (Swami & Furnham, 2014) and at lower levels of education (Douglas et al., 2016). Such narratives facilitate motivated reasoning that may help people justify their beliefs and actions, both to themselves and others. In this analysis then, conspiracy beliefs are associated with counter-normative behaviour, such as refusing vaccines, not following containment guidelines during a pandemic emergency and anti-social behaviour (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

In general, conspiracy theories seem to provide broad and coherent explanations, allowing individuals to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradictions. They have an impact on an individual’s psychophysical health, social behaviour, socio-economic and political factors and, in general, the well-being of society. The ways in which human beings make decisions and act are strongly influenced by their view of reality and their

epistemic, existential and social needs. Conspiracy beliefs are not the only response to epistemic and existential needs, for example, trust in science or religious beliefs also increase when social situations stimulate these needs (Farias et al., 2013; Pargament et al., 2013). As mentioned, such beliefs may also have psychological benefits in that they give the perceivers' worldview a rewarding meaning and purpose. They offer the possibility of constructing an alternative reality in which perceivers can see themselves and their group as key players, can justify any belief and action as legitimate, and enjoy the opportunity to explore a mystery in an exciting narrative, stimulating feelings of excitement.

Many conspiracy theories provide alternative explanations for high-impact events in the world, such as pandemics, wars, environmental disasters; in this perspective, relying on unfounded but less worrisome content and such theories, therefore, can help the individual feel gratified by such a 'discovery'. Studies show that people are more likely to become radicalized as a result of situations of injustice or humiliation (Kruglanski et al., 2014), associating such beliefs, at first glance, with a positive perception, capable, in reality, of defending only relatively fragile forms of self-perception.

However, it is important to note that such benefits are temporary in nature, suggesting that conspiracy theories actually provide people with a form of instant gratification (Van Prooijen, 2022). That said, the effects related to such narratives appear to be mostly rather negative. The belief in conspiracies can influence negatively, decisions or policies related to social well-being, weakening the public consensus for those policies directed at dealing with emergency matters, such as pandemics or climate change. Moreover, such beliefs are sometimes associated with extreme movements and violent activism. The individual who believes in conspiracy theories and recognises the psychological benefits does not imply a recommendation to endorse them, nor a stance against interventions to reduce extreme and conspiracy content and misinformation (e.g., debunking). The benefits of believing in conspiracies may be psychologically rewarding in the short term for the individual, like smoking or gambling, but society reaps the consequences long term negative impacts (Butter & Knight, 2020).

The picture that emerges is, therefore, very complex. There are countless factors that lead individuals to believe and rely on conspiracy theories. They include personality, social factors linked to behaviour, or purely random factors linked to information exposure,

which is often chaotic and overly broad. These are cognitive factors and factors that point to the functional role of such beliefs, which are probably self-protective in nature. Therefore, to reduce the influence of such theories and foster an informed and cohesive society, the promotion of media literacy and critical education, the use of evidence-based communication strategies, greater community involvement, strengthening a sense of belonging and social support, and investment in research and popularisation of science are essential.

These theories spread as identifiable cognitive errors, which operate in combination with informational and reputational influences (Evanega et al., 2020).

The pandemic period has highlighted one of the issues that scholars have been trying to address for years. Scientific discoveries or events are often the target of misinformation and conspiracy theories, with the aim of distorting public perception of scientific evidence. One of the vulnerabilities of democratic societies is the need for members to be involved in political debates and for dissenting voices to be heard. The most critical issue to be addressed is the conflict between legitimate democratic criticism of scientifically informed policies and scientifically motivated denial (Lewandowsky, Armaos & Cook, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented infodemic. The political strategies adopted during the emergency period, the involvement of politicians and politically active actors played an essential role in orienting citizens' ideologies and choices. For instance, a textual analysis of thirty-eight million online documents (Evanega et al., 2020) identified then-President Trump as one of the main vectors of misinformation, and linked to reduced compliance with pandemic control measures, which resulted in much higher infection and mortality rates in counties supporting the former president (Gollwitzer, 2020). Over the years, a growing body of evidence has been gathered showing that vaccination hesitancy is primarily associated with the political right rather than the left, although it can clearly be argued that political extremism, in general, may be a factor that transcends membership of conservative or more liberal ideology (Lewandowsky & Oberauer, 2021); pre-pandemic research, in fact, has amply demonstrated how extremism in general, regardless of orientation, is a predictor of conspiratorial thinking (Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet, 2015). A quadratic relationship clearly emerges between political ideological strength and

conspiracy narratives, thus confirming that political extremes – both left and right – are capable of exerting strong pressure and triggering a tendency towards extremism and conspiracy on differently minded groups.

When science affects the socio-economic and political dimension of a country and the daily lives of its citizens, there is a clear perception of a clash between two fundamental rights: the right to be heard and the right not to be misled. In this view, sound scientific knowledge and the ability to identify misleading arguments and inoculate the public against their negative effects are crucial. According to Lewandowsky, inoculation theory assumes that people can be protected when they are warned of potential deception and exposed to prior rebuttal. The effectiveness of inoculation has been proven in various situations, including misinformation about COVID-19 and conspiracy theories and extremist content related to vaccines. This theory is based on two approaches, the first based on facts, whereby an attempt is made to prove misinformation through factual explanations, the second based on logic, which focuses more on the identification of reasoning techniques, rather than on the content itself (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). In addition to an irrefutable scientific basis, the approach based, for example, on ‘motivational interviewing’, i.e. on listening, empathy and understanding the circumstances, has proved particularly effective (Gagneur, 2020). It is only when uninformative, polarising, misleading arguments manage to be first identified and then rejected, that the ‘Holy Grail of deliberative, inclusive, transparent and accountable decision-making’ can be achieved (Lewandowsky et al., 2022).

7.0 Legal Perspectives

From a constitutional point of view, the issue of possibly countering the spread of misinformation, extreme discourse, and conspiracy theories intercepts the essence of Böckenförde's paradox that "The secularized liberal State lives on assumptions that it cannot guarantee" (Pollicino, 2007). Intervention to clean up the infosphere of misinformation and polarized content requires the adoption of a series of limitations that risk placing limits on one of the most important freedoms of a liberal State, the right to speech, thus generating a paradox.

The relationship between law, misinformation and conspiracy theories can be complex and multifaceted. While law is a normative system that seeks to regulate society and ensure order, conspiracy theories are concepts that claim that certain events are the result of secret or malevolent conspiracies. Scientific doctrine, in the context of law, is based on rational, evidence-based analysis. Whereas conspiracy theories often lack a solid empirical basis and are supported by speculation, distorted interpretations of facts or unverifiable testimony, scientific doctrine focuses on the objective evaluation of evidence and the search for truth.

The relationship between law, misinformation, extreme content and conspiracy theories is complex and requires a balance between the right to freedom of expression and the protection of the public from misleading or harmful behaviour. The law can intervene when such content leads to unlawful behaviour, but, in general, countering such phenomena requires a multifactorial approach involving education, accurate information and open dialogue. Scientific doctrine plays a crucial role in the evaluation of evidence in the legal context and can help counter misinformation and conspiracy theories by providing a rational, evidence-centred basis for evaluating claims.

This section focuses on three main topics: freedom of expression, the relationship between misinformation and Artificial Intelligence and the role and responsibilities of Internet service providers.

7.1 Freedom of Expression

The legal framework of Western democracies is particularly sensitive to the phenomenon of misinformation, propaganda, extremism and conspiracy theories. The European constitutional and regulatory framework was structured in a context that was totally different from today's landscape, at a time when technological development and available digital tools were still a long way off and requirements were far removed from the difficulties that citizens must face today. The European approach, based on the American matrix, protects the free formation of personal opinions, which are confronted in a 'free market' of ideas (Ziccardi, 2019), giving ample space for the free circulation of thoughts and content, with the only limitation being respect for the fundamental rights of the individual, in order to guarantee a healthy information environment free of discrimination. It is precisely this freedom that makes Western democracies an attractive target and incites instances of misinformation and propaganda interfering with democracy by altering public debate.

The emergence of digital platforms marked the beginning of a new era for the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). The post-modern reality is characterised by social, economic, political and existential uncertainties and hybrid, often immaterial or invisible, threats. The fragility of the hierarchical structures of knowledge transmission has bequeathed a sense of mistrust, the culture of relativism and what is called the 'post-truth era': the culture of knowledge has been replaced by a culture of risks (Bayer et al., 2019). Even though the digital evolution has involved users previously underrepresented by the traditional media, the system, in fact, currently supports the interests of an elite that looks primarily – and perhaps exclusively – to business.

The impact of misinformation, extremism and conspiracy theories affects data protection, privacy and human dignity, on the one hand, and freedom of expression and being informed, on the other. The basis of democracy is the open public debate that requires a harmony between media freedom, the right to be properly informed and freedom of expression. The risk, which becomes more and more concrete in such an open and digitised space, is that the volume of information often complicates access to reliable and verified content. The ability of each user to be both receiver and possible author of

information, sometimes, does not allow the juxtaposition of an efficient filter and control, thus risking undermining the stability of the democratic system.

European law provides for a rather limited and deficient strategy regarding the approach to misinformation and fake news due to the temporal aspect of the phenomenon, which often has a reasonably short life cycle. In individual legal systems, it is possible to find rules that protect misinformation across the board, in the case, for example, of the principle of direct damage, in the case of false, overstated or tendentious news that is liable to disturb public order or cause alarm. Or in the case of the offence of defamation, specifically in the form of direct damage to reputation, where the injury caused is of immediate perception. This is conduct that can be carried out by any person and in different ways, with many European legal systems providing for an aggravated form if the offence is conveyed online.

Sometimes the phenomenon of fake news concerns a broader and more complex project, also contributing in the long term to a substantial change in the perception and opinion of the victim-subjects. One only has to think of conspiracy theories, cases in which fake news is used as a strategy to manipulate groups of people with the aim of polarising an ideology, which often has no foundation. From this perspective, the phenomenon could perhaps be framed as a true hybrid threat and as part of the ‘information war’, thus providing a more consolidated frame of reference and filling the gaps (Suffia, 2022). The relationship between freedom of expression, misinformation and conspiracy theories is a complex issue that raises several legal and ethical questions. Freedom of expression in the European Union is a fundamental principle enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Article 11 of the Charter states that ‘everyone has the right to freedom of expression’, which means that everyone has the right to express their opinions, ideas and beliefs without unjustified interference by public authorities.

The right of expression in the EU covers a wide range of forms of communication, including freedom of speech, freedom of information, freedom of the press and freedom of the media. This right is one of the main pillars of democracy and European values and is enshrined in the most evolved mindsets as the combination of ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘democracy’, as it enshrines the right of citizens to express their opinions and ideas without government interference or undue restrictions. It is considered essential to foster open and

pluralistic public debate, allow democratic participation and promote diversity of opinion. The main challenge in the context of the right of expression is to strike a balance between protecting this fundamental right and dealing with the potential negative consequences of misinformation and conspiracy theories: while it is important to guarantee freedom of expression, there are situations where conspiracy theories may cause tangible harm or raise concerns for public safety and the well-being of society.

Freedom of expression is not an absolute right: the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights played a significant role in defining the boundaries of the right of expression in the EU, developing jurisprudence that balances the right of expression with other legitimate needs, ensuring that restrictions are applied in a manner consistent with democratic principles and human rights. Striking a balance requires a considered approach that considers fundamental rights, scientific evidence, education and the public interest.

The development of a new digital dimension and the spread of new channels of communication led to the rise of a true technological identity. Users, the holders of what is known as digital citizenship, are the bearers of new rights, ranging from participation, information and interaction to new duties, designed to guarantee the security of users themselves, the protection of their data and the set of principles and values underpinning the main human rights Charters. In 2015, the new text of the Declaration of Rights on the Internet was drafted by the Commission on Internet Rights and Duties. The Charter represents the tool for building citizenship in the age of the Internet of Things and it is a fundamental instrument since without citizenship there is no democracy. It was the object of numerous consultations, and its main goal is to rebalance rights by laying the foundations of an ever-changing reality, recognising the freedom, equality, dignity and diversity of each person, promoting innovation, growth and fair competition within a global context.

Article 1 of the Declaration guarantees the fundamental rights of every person and one of the passages, that created not a few controversies within the digital space, is precisely that relating to freedom of expression, provided, as we have seen, in Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 10 of the ECHR.

The internet is seen as a borderless reality that allows for the existence of an ideally more liberal and free society, and it is from this perspective that the greatest effort must be made, so that the full exercise of all rights can be guaranteed. Freedom of speech stems from the need to allow everyone to express their ideas without any pre-conceptual veto. This fundamental claim, which goes well with democratic ideals, is declined, on the web, in an almost exponential way since all social profiles, by definition, are created at the same level of notoriety and potentially have the same media resonance. The problems generated by a society with these premises are many: starting from the consideration of a new world in which the weight of words loses its meaning, since the statements of a leader of a State can potentially have the same audience and resonance as those of an ordinary person. This starting point begins to blur the contours of a far more multifaceted right of expression in the digital sphere, which inevitably takes on negative implications, impossible to foresee initially.

Another problem that arises and on which it is inevitable to dwell is the role of users, who hold a dual position: on the one hand, they are the recipients of an excessive amount of information, on the other hand, they may represent the source itself. It is inevitable that this gives rise to an unstoppable flow of content and information accessible to all, which, while representing one of the secrets of the success of these platforms, is also one of its greatest flaws. However, the Internet is not a paradise for freedom of expression worldwide.

In Europe, the digital platforms are not subject to government control, therefore, it is the companies, owners of the content and data flows, that hold the power. Here, the freedom of speech, the right of access and the protection of anonymity provided for by the Declaration are fully guaranteed, allowing subjects to express their personalities within society. The social phenomenon had the merit of connecting the entire world and shortening distances by making them just a click away, but this sudden change has brought different cultures and traditions of peoples and States that have found themselves living together within the same platform. The difficulty lies, precisely, in accommodating these diversities by allowing a more gradual adaptation of different cultures to a world without borders, which undoubtedly represents the future of humanity.

In a world where the makers of news are also their own users and vice versa, the users are at the mercy of billions of pieces of information at any given moment. This enormous mass of news, that invades and pervades everyday life, leaves no space for careful evaluation or contradiction and, on the one hand, this is all instrumental in providing information that is often hasty and incomplete information, while on the other, it generates a feeling of rejection and apathy in the web population. Although the welter of content makes one think of more varied and complete information, it often has the opposite effect, generating misinformation and distrust in the information media. This mechanism has created important consequences in people's daily lives, in the political scenario and in national security. Although at first glance they seem very distant, in a world in which we are all connected, the consciousness of an entire community – perhaps – resides on the web.

The problem of the right of expression shows the various governments approach the new difficulties, often trudging along and leaving space for the Tech companies, which do not struggle to fill the void left by legislative norms, thus becoming the true guarantors of the rules of the new world. Humanity, therefore, finds itself in a situation where two opposing forces try to take control of a new reality in which people are looking for references and new rules to follow and rely on. The key word is 'balance'. The balance that needs to be found between institutions and companies that allow for regulation that protects users and encourages, at the same time, the economy, offering everyone certainties and eliminating pretexts.

7.2 The relationship between misinformation and Artificial Intelligence

The need to regulate the development and use of artificial intelligence to manage a world that, in the near future, will live on artificial intelligence is evident. Large Generative AI Models (LGAIM) are revolutionising the way an individual works, communicates, approaches and visualises new content, spanning different sectors of society, from medicine to business planning, from education to research, from communication to the liberal professions and public services. Such systems can offer enormous potential, contributing to a more effective and potentially fairer allocation of resources, while also entailing significant risks. Due to their design and capacity, LGAIMs (e.g., ChatGPT, Stable

Diffusion, Synthesia, MusicalLM)(Hacker, Engel & Mauer, 2023) and artificial intelligence chatbots can engage in the large-scale dissemination of false narratives, inducing unsuspecting individuals to believe in and share inaccurate information.

In recent years, end-to-end neural conversational agents have greatly improved their ability to conduct efficient conversations with humans. However, such models are generally trained on large amounts of data from internet and can learn and be implemented on the basis of toxic behaviour or extreme and harmful stances (Bergman et al., 2022). As seen in the previous sections, misinformation has the potential to undermine trust, exacerbate social and political divisions and – even – incite acts of violence. From a legal and regulatory perspective, it is of considerable interest to study possible policy proposals for content moderation in LGAIM, due to their versatility and wide range of applications. It is pragmatically accepted that the models used for regulation should be as flexible as possible to allow greater freedom and innovation for users.

Some believe that AI can solve the problems it creates by using automatic content filtering systems (through a combination of AI tools, developer and user intervention and a set of rules) that can identify harmful content and provide a means for effective self-regulation and co-regulation by platforms (Abdikhakimov, 2023). However, AI algorithms may not be the only way to regulate consensus in the future as their accuracy is limited, especially for expressions where cultural or contextual input are needed. Others argue that the answer to the problems of misinformation on LGAIM can be found through the implementation of transparency obligations and specific mechanisms that could be made mandatory by regulators, such as trustworthy flags indicating potentially problematic content according to different categories (hate, violence, gender, etc.) and/or external audits and evaluations (Kertysova, 2020).

The debate focuses on identifying the most appropriate legislation to directly address the risks posed by these technologies. Some (Hacker, 2022) believe that the regulation of LGAIM risks should generally focus on the applications of these technologies, rather than on the pre-trained model, through technology-neutral laws aimed at addressing critical issues more effectively and focused on three levels of obligations. First, it notes the analysis of minimum standards for all LGAIM, secondly, it defines high-risk obligations for high-risk use cases, and finally, it envisages collaboration along the AI value

chain, including obligations on transparency, risk management and content moderation rules (Hacker, Engel & Mauer, 2023).

According to this orientation, the specific regulation risks becoming obsolete even before, or immediately after, its implementation, given the changing nature of these technologies (Hacker, Engel & Mauer, 2023). It remains essential, in any case, to distinguish between LGAIM developers who pre-train the models; distributors who optimise them for specific use cases; professional and non-professional users who generate the output; and the final recipients of the services. In this way, it is possible to effectively analyse the most appropriate regulatory obligations according to the different actors involved, opting for a greater focus on the generation phase – anticipating or mitigating risk – or on the subsequent implementation phase.

Regulators and legislators need to act quickly to keep up with the unconstrained dynamics of AI models, updating regulation and striking the right balance between promoting innovation and safeguarding against potential harm, thus creating a level playing field for the development and deployment of future AI models within European borders and overseas. Given these premises, it is evident how the limitations of these technologies in recognising the digital pollution of the infosphere are emerging and, through an important renewal and adaptation activity, it is necessary to define a solid and updated regulatory framework.

The year 2023 is the year in which legislators were able to agree on a vision and set a strategy, 2024 will be, probably, the year in which policies will start to turn into concrete actions. It is fundamental for law to establish definitions, procedures and results that can be comprehensible and acceptable for the integrity of the system. It is the task of law to provide the principles based on which laws and regulations can be adopted. The United States, China and Europe, albeit with different approaches and strategies, are the main players on the global scene dominating the race for technological supremacy. The United States was the first country to implement a strategic plan for research and development of AI technologies, with the intention of minimising government interference. China has set itself the goal of becoming a world leader by 2030, while keeping political control and decision-making power in the hands of the State. Finally, the European Union, although from a research and development point of view it is at a distinct disadvantage, represents

a model of guarantee aimed at ensuring that the development of AI technologies does not harm fundamental rights, democracy, the rule of law and environmental sustainability (Pisanelli, 2022).

The United States is attempting to promote and develop regulation that demands greater transparency and new standards in each area in which AI plays an important role. The executive order issued by President Biden envisages a series of initiatives and procedures aimed at building a system that, on the one hand, allows for the safe and controlled development of such technologies and, on the other, protects citizens by assessing and mitigating risks in the use of AI. The next few months will be a great challenge for the American landscape: in fact, the presidential elections are expected to influence much of the political debate on the use of generative artificial intelligence, the management of misinformation and the viralisation of polarised content on social media platforms, and the regulation and prevention of the harms and risks that such technologies can generate, globally.

Chinese regulation was initially fragmented, having preferred ad hoc legislative acts for algorithmic recommendation services, deepfake and generative artificial intelligence. The Chinese effort, in recent months, is turning to the definition of a unified regulatory framework aimed at guaranteeing an efficient algorithm training phase, a careful selection of data sets and respect for privacy and intellectual property. Whilst it seems to be in line with the European approach, the drive to control information and a surrender of civil rights to social control by the authority, following the model of Chinese socialism, is strongly evident. China has been very responsive to the development of new technologies; it was, in fact, the first Country in the world to introduce legislation on generative artificial intelligence a few months after the ChatGPT breakthrough.

The European Union is working on several fronts to try to effectively regulate artificial intelligence systems with specific instruments (Artificial Intelligence Act, Artificial Intelligence Directive, Product Liability Directive, Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act). In December 2023 an agreement was reached on the proposal for harmonised rules on artificial intelligence, the Artificial Intelligence Act, which aims to ensure that AI systems placed on the European market and used in the EU are safe and respect the fundamental

rights and values of the EU, stimulating innovation and the uptake of artificial intelligence across Europe in full respect of citizens' rights and freedoms.

The purpose of the regulation is to improve the functioning of the internal market by establishing a uniform legal framework regarding the development, marketing and use of artificial intelligence in accordance with EU values. The regulation aims to pursue several imperative initiatives in the public interest, such as a high level of protection of health, safety and fundamental rights, and ensures the free movement of AI-based goods and services across borders, thus preventing Member States from imposing restrictions on the development, marketing and use of AI systems. This legislation contributes to the Union's goal of being a world leader in the development of safe, reliable and ethical artificial intelligence, as stated by the European Council (EUCO 13/20, 2020), and ensures the protection of ethical principles as specifically requested by the European Parliament (2020/2012(INL)). Particular attention is paid to models and applications that are deemed to pose a 'high risk' to fundamental rights, such as those intended for use in areas such as health care, education, or the ban on the creation of facial recognition databases (such as those of Clearview AI) or in relation to the use of emotion recognition technology at work or in schools. The AI Act is aimed at companies requiring greater transparency regarding the method of training and development of models and systems, in order to minimise risks and biases.

7.3 The role and responsibilities of Internet Service Providers

The creation and dissemination of conspiracy theories, today, finds new life in digital technologies, which are able to spread messages in immediate and pervasive ways. Digital technologies remove territorial boundaries, thus making it possible to convey messages with a speed and diffusion unknown in the past. Conspiracy theories are often based on or found in fake news, which thus contribute to the dissemination or, even, may convey messages with clearly defamatory content. Only the correctly informed citizen can fully exercise popular sovereignty (Judgment no. 16236, Italian Supreme Court July 9, 2010).

Information has become a defining aspect of people's and companies' lives, and this makes the race for innovation a real information war, in which the most powerful weapon is the Internet. Information and telecommunications have become the gold mines of the

world's superpowers who, in addition to increasing their economic empire, create for themselves a window into every aspect of everyday life. There is a new domain beyond land, sea, sky and space that runs parallel to cyber: it is the power of information and the use of mass media. It is a fundamental battlefield for understanding the dynamics of the world and, above all, also for understanding the importance of certain international investigations and clashes (Welch, 2011).

In such a context, information is available to everyone and this massification has generated requirements in terms of form and content that are very different from the previous ones. Society adapted to this radical change by favouring speed and ease in finding news rather than the reliability of sources, striking a heavy blow to the intricate traditional journalistic network. Another key step in this evolution, which marked the history of computerised popularisation as we know it, is economics, which helped to disrupt the journalistic network that was based on a secure and tangible market. In this fertile ground, the results of the perennial hurry and the free creation and dissemination of information, extremely varied movements, theories and beliefs are born, dividing the people of the internet into millions of groups that identify with an idea, and relying on a particular source of information.

Fake news, denialism, and online extremism are just some of the phenomena generated by the digitalisation of information, which in its best merit, that of being accessible to all, also finds its greatest flaw, in that its regulation is often complicated and controversial. The growing use of mass media raises the possibility of exposure to information, but the worrying aspect that emerges is that access to algorithmic sources favours the filter bubble, and a superficial and not very varied consumption of news, thus increasing the risk of misinformation and polarisation, with obvious repercussions on the spread of radicalised positions.

This condition generates a limited vision; the user no longer perceives reality in its complexity but interacts with content identified, based only on their preferences, ideologies and interests. The filter bubble, in reality, is not the goal that companies pursue, it is the effect of customisation that big tech and social networks operate on users. It is evident that the big tech giants hold the reins of citizens' lives, influencing preferences and manipulating choices. And this scenario, at times, can appear alarming. It therefore seems

necessary to reflect on the role and responsibilities of the platforms where these messages are conveyed, starting the legal reflection from the regulatory framework outlined by the European Union.

The first organic regulation of the responsibilities of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) of a community type dates back more than two decades ago, with Directive No. 31/2000/EC (the so-called E-commerce Directive), later updated by the more recent Digital Service Act Regulation. In a context of strong growth of digital media, at the beginning of the 2000s the need for a regulation defining the obligations and responsibilities of Internet Service Providers (ISP) in the event of dissemination of illicit content generated by their users was felt by many. In fact, if there seems to be no doubt that if the unlawful act is carried out directly by the ISP, the latter must be held liable, the case of unlawful contents generated by users who use the services made available by the ISP is more complex, thus leading to the question of whether the latter should have an obligation to supervise the contents that are conveyed through its services, even if generated by third parties. This issue is still debated among commentators and has led European case law to rule on the matter on several occasions.

Following the outline of the text of the Directive, it is necessary to distinguish ISPs into three categories, according to the services offered, since the liability regime identified for each of them is modulated precisely because of the actual role they play in conveying potentially harmful messages to third party users. The Community legislation, after having made a necessary categorisation of the subjects involved, given the breadth of the category of services offered, rather than attributing specific responsibilities, identifies exemption criteria and exceptions to the general liability provision. It appears evident, therefore, that the European legislator has based the regulation of this sector on the principle of neutrality, according to which, therefore, the provider of digital services is not held liable for any offences committed by third parties (the illicit content generated by its users), under certain conditions, since the directive does not provide for a general obligation of surveillance by ISPs.

It is therefore possible to identify service providers (mere conduits) that merely provide access to a network or transmit on that network the information provided by the user (e.g. e-mail service providers); service providers that allow temporary storage of the

data (caching) provided by users; and, finally, service providers that provide permanent storage of the data (hosting) of users data. Providers of conduit services that have limited themselves to technical and automated activities will not be liable if unlawful content is transmitted by users. Indeed, the legislation provides that they are exempt from liability if they have not originated the information, selected the recipient of the transmission, or chosen or modified the transmitted information.

Caching service providers, on the other hand are exempt from liability if they have not modified the transmitted information, confirmed the conditions of access to the information, complied with the rules for updating the information, and do not interfere with the legitimate use of technology used in the industry to obtain data on the use of the information, act abruptly to remove the stored information or disable access to it once they realise that such information has been removed from where it was initially located on the network or that access has been disabled or that a judicial body has ordered its removal or disabling.

Finally, more stringent exemption criteria are provided for hosting services, precisely because of the role played by the provider to the point of identifying a real obligation to act aimed at stopping unlawful activities carried out by users. In fact, the legislator provides that they may be exempt from liability if they are not actually aware of the fact that the content conveyed by the user is unlawful, and are not aware of facts or circumstances that make the unlawfulness of the activity or information manifest, and if they act immediately to remove the information or disable access to it as soon as they are informed of its unlawful nature by the competent authorities. It therefore seems clear that the distinction is precisely the nature of the service provided by the ISP, the more they can be considered active, thus guaranteeing services that are not limited to being of an eminently technical nature, and therefore not limited to guaranteeing a neutral provision of the service, the more it will be called upon to pay attention and intervene promptly to prevent the dissemination of illicit content generated by its users. Given the growing need for stricter control aimed at limiting the dissemination of illegal content, following the guidelines of the European Union, service providers have introduced a Notice and Take Down system for the benefit of those involved. In fact, it is foreseen that the person

concerned notifies the content considered harmful so that the provider removes the illicit content and no longer allows its reproduction and dissemination.

With the recent Digital Service Act, the European legislator has provided for even more stringent obligations for platforms, modulating their intensity according to the type of service offered and the number of users (a subdivision into four categories of platforms is envisaged), with the declared aim of discouraging the dissemination of illegal content in a more incisive manner. Consequently, new transparency rules, stricter reporting requirements and liability obligations for providers have been introduced.

From the brief regulatory framework referred to here, it is then clear that there is a need to verify whether the legislation in force today can be considered a valid and effective legal instrument in countering the spread of conspiracy theories and limiting the possible damage they cause to third parties. It is also desirable to examine the possibility of using other regulatory instruments to protect not only individuals but also the members of a group, such as the recently enacted legislation aimed at regulating a form of class action of European origin. The European effort aims to produce technologies and offer services for the benefit of mankind, to build an efficient and reliable artificial intelligence. Digital policies seek to outline a comprehensive and reliable regulatory framework, paying particular attention to continuous innovation, accountability, algorithmic discrimination, helping to stimulate a fair and potentially sustainable AI (Hacker, 2022).

8.0 Social media and technological perspectives

The final chapter explores how social media are currently permeated by conspiracy theories: once perceived as delusions of those on the fringes of society, they have now become commonplace in digital culture. They are mostly produced, consumed, endorsed and circulated on online media environments, which have given conspiracy narratives new shapes and content, from memes on 4chan, audiovisual materials on YouTube, QAnon or antivaxx influencers' image posts on Instagram and on Facebook. This digital scenario related to the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation is further aggravated if we consider the age range targeted by this project, the population aged 45-65: suffice it to say that during the 2016 US elections, Twitter users over 50 represented the so-called "supersharers", a group responsible for 80% of fake news (Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). The increased propensity to be familiar with fake news with advancing age depends on a combination of several factors: cognitive declines, social changes, and digital illiteracy (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). It seems evident, therefore, that the current objective, on the digital front, is first to gain an in-depth understanding of the scale and extent of the problem linked to the spread of conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism in the digital age, and then to take action at educating these people on the conscious and informed use of the various digital tools and the critical evaluation of the online information contained therein. Conspiracy theories, characterised by the construction of alternative narratives and mistrust of official sources, find fertile ground in social platforms, fuelled by digital echo chambers and algorithms that promote polarisation. In the same way, misinformation and extremism find a safe space for their development within digital platforms, due to the characteristics of the platforms themselves.

The central starting point in this discussion is the realisation that we live in the Big Data society: in the Big Data society, not only is information central to development trends, but the information domain itself is expropriated from traditional institutions and the press in order to be democratically open to data that are entered directly by users and even by the machines themselves (Suffia, 2022). This democratic opening shown by the digital environment has favoured and fueled the spread of misleading content, conspiracy

theories and misinformation, because it has left users with a great deal of freedom and autonomy in the creation of digital content, which is often not adequately screened and controlled by platform operators. Moreover, as cyberspace is an entirely artificial territory, it is heavily influenced by human particularity, since it is humans who have placed resources within it. This condition is exacerbated today by algorithms, which now produce more data than human beings (Floridi, 2017). It is therefore necessary to analyse the characteristics and problems of such a digital scenario in which online misinformation grows (Suffia, 2022) and to focus our efforts within the SMIDGE project to address and understand the unique characteristics of the 45-65 age group:

- The amount of news is exponentially higher than at any other time in history. There is information overload, such that there is too much information and are unable to analyse it without the aid of computers;.
- The authority of those who create news today is difficult to verify, since everyone, theoretically, is able to create newsworthy content.
- The veracity of the news created is difficult to verify, especially before its dissemination-viralisation;
- The activity of creating digital content is rapid as is its viralisation. Such speed suggests that it is virtually impossible to detect false information before it spreads to an incalculable number of individuals as it only becomes detectable when certain thresholds are reached.
- The problem of speed also occurs with passive misinformation due to the lack of attention paid to reading online content. Misinformation is often conveyed through misleading headlines alone, not followed by reading the full text of the article;
- From a psychological point of view, since we do not always know who the sender of a given piece of news is, we tend to trust content that is shared with us by our friends and our closest contacts who include people we follow online and trust, but we do not know personally in real life.

Against this digital backdrop, it is not surprising that conspiracy theories, misinformation and online extremism have spread predominantly through social media,

due to social and psychological factors and the accelerating media attention economy (Venturini, 2022). Research and literature on the characteristics of the online conspiracy and its particular form of storytelling still appear scarce at the moment. A study conducted by the University of Geneva described online conspiracism as a form of degenerate digital folklore, connected to the notion of secondary orality (Venturini, 2022). Using natural language processing techniques, online conspiracy and misinformation are associated with a typically oral communicative tone, which is characterised by a mode of communication similar to that of preliterate cultures. In order to explain the evanescence of digital communication, despite being based on highly sophisticated technologies and copious documentation.

4chan, Telegram, Twitter(X) and others, are message boards and social media sites that have been key in the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Their model encourages its users to post anonymously allowing the publication of posts that are in some cases offensive, but with little accountability to the anonymous account holder. Through their algorithms and interfaces, such social media platforms extend the logic of attention flows beyond advertising, creating a 'frictionless flow of behavioral surplus' (Zuboff, 2019), enrolling contents and users in a relentless competition for an ephemeral visibility (Venturini, 2019). By transforming the web from an archive of documents into a marketplace where attention is managed as a constantly renewable flow, online platforms create an evanescent communication environment not dissimilar to those of oral cultures.

The above discussion helps to understand the success of conspiratorial folklore, which is perfectly attuned to social media attention flows. Two characteristics of conspiracy narratives, elasticity and flagrancy deserve a special discussion as they can be directly mapped onto the two crucial qualities of oral folklore, i.e., repeatability and memorability. Elasticity describes a process of sensemaking based on fluid adaptation rather than analytical accumulation. The fact that online conspiracism ensures its durability through elasticity rather than consistency is the reason why it is more appropriate to call its expressions 'conspiracy narratives' rather than 'conspiracy theories'. The second key feature of digital orality is its flagrancy, that is its ability to command and maintain attention by shocking its audience. Common in online settings, this communication technique is known as 'trolling' (Bishop, 2014). Online trolls hijack attention by asking silly

questions, voicing outraging ideas, insulting others, violating community codes, and generally pushing others into controversies. By their extreme political incorrectness, conspiracy narratives constitute forms of ‘excitable speech’ with a ‘power to injure’ (Butler, 1997), making them difficult to ignore or forget, even in the short-term memory environment of online media.

While every platform relies on some form of attention queue management, the precise functioning of these systems is extremely varied. For example, in 4chan, attention management is strictly chronological; in Reddit, visibility is regulated by a voting system; in Twitter(X), by a keyword system (hashtags); in YouTube, by a recommendation algorithm; in Facebook by a mix of the approaches. Visibility algorithms are only one of the factors that shape the dynamics of online attention and conspiracy cultures. Indeed, even in the most mainstream social platforms there are precise attention/communication techniques and dynamics used by them that foster and nurture conspiracy narratives. For example, an analysis conducted from May to August 2020 on 24 conspiracy videos on YouTube showed how conspiracy theorists use audiovisual strategies to imagine theories of ‘opaque power’ by *decoding* mass media material and *encoding* their opposition readings in self-constructed videos through three audiovisual strategies (Simulating, Deciphering and Exhibiting) (Grusauskaite, Harambam & Aupers, 2022). Instagram was also subject to such activity, and during the coronavirus pandemic, there was a proliferation of conspiracy theories on the platform which were then merged into one overarching narrative and the fear of the ‘Deep State’ (Tuters & Willaert, 2022).

Despite the importance of research focusing on social media and how conspiracy theories spread on its platforms, it was found that other online information retrieval and curation platforms - such as SEs - may contribute to the proliferation of conspiracy theories online. In this regard, a systematic analysis of the presence of conspiracy information in Web search results (Urman et al., 2022) showed that while there are large query-based differences, conspiracy/promoting content routinely re-emerges on the first page of results on all searches engine except Google. Google’s results also contain the highest percentage of scientific sources debunking conspiracy theories. Another finding is that Yandex has the highest share of links to conspiracy content. At the same time, most of the content on all

engines (except Yandex) comes from media and referral websites that tend to contain less conspiratorial content.

The promotion of such information in the top search results is also worrying. If a person is simply interested in – but not yet a believer in – certain conspiracies, then conspiratorial content coming from a highly trusted source can foster conspiratorial belief development. If that person at least partially believes in a conspiracy theory, their belief can be reinforced by conspiracy-promoting web search results due to high public trust in search engine results coupled with confirmation bias (Suzuki & Yamamoto, 2020). Due to the latter, the presence of even a single conspiracy-promoting result in the top results may be sufficient to reinforce conspiracy beliefs. It is important to note, however, that the purpose of information intermediaries, such as search engines, is to actively limit public access to potentially misleading or even harmful information.

In conclusion, it was found that most search engines display conspiracy-promoting results, although the share of such results varies across specific conspiracy-related queries. Most conspiracy-promoting results came from social media platforms and conspiracy-related websites, while debunking information was mainly found on scientific websites and, to a lesser extent, in legacy media. Google is the search engine with the largest market share and managed to limit the problem to a few isolated cases (Urman et al., 2022). Google's example shows that conspiratorial results can indeed be managed to become less prevalent, and that other search engines should follow this example and place the results they provide under greater control. This is particularly relevant and timely now, when radical groups are attempting to create an alternative technology ecosystem and, among other things, migrate from Google to DuckDuckGo, accusing the former of censorship. In this context, it is crucial to ensure the quality of the information that search engines provide to users through internal monitoring and external audits of search engines.

Preliminary conclusions

The purpose of this study was to give an initial overview of the current landscape of conspiracy theories and misinformation with a special focus on the middle age. The research literature on the 45-65 demographic is still very rare and the SMIDGE projects aims to bridge the gap. The numerous scientific studies we have collected in this first year – around 300, and almost all peer-reviewed – focus generically on young people and adolescents as well as adults. Among those, scholars seem to disagree on the relationship between age and misinformation and on whether the elderly or young are more or less susceptible to conspiracy theories. In some of the analysed cases, the focus is on the elderly, but the age group of our interest is still not analysed or discussed.

However, our preliminary research has revealed some recurring and more general features in the creation and dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories, as well as critical links with religious sentiment and politics. It emerged how conspiracy theories commonly have the presentation of a counter-power, whose actions are directed at manipulating and controlling society, and elements such as secrecy and deception. Conspiracy narratives are often based on the concept of a secret deep-state operation, aimed at controlling society through a range of levels of deception.

From a political standpoint, misinformation may be used by politicians to consolidate the status quo (for incumbents) and to produce political propaganda with the aim of polarising discourses and potentially influencing voting outcomes. Likewise, direct links between some politicians and conspiracy groups have emerged with serious implications in terms of violence and damage to the foundations of democracy and pluralism (for example, the role played by Donald Trump and QAnon in the Capitol Hill attack).

Religion is both susceptible to and the users of conspiracy theories, and it may be used by religious exponents as a way to marginalise opponents and establish their beliefs, or to ascribe all original faults to a scapegoat (anti-Semitism phenomena). From a social and philosophical perspective, misinformation and conspiracy theories generally seem to appeal to individuals' fears, emerging in times of crisis when seeking simple and conclusive

explanations for complex events. Oppressed minorities also have a greater propensity to believe and rely on polarising ideologies and conspiracy narratives, so to identify and ideologically fight the perpetrator of their community's problems. Further, the level of education plays an essential role in limiting the susceptibility of individuals to fake news and misinformation whereby people with a university degree were shown to be less likely to believe misinformation about COVID-19 and more likely to trust preventive measures than those without a university degree.

The spread of conspiracies is connected to human psychology and has multiple psychological effects on individuals and society as a whole. The need to adhere to a certain narrative may be driven by the desire to give meaning to confused or poorly understood events, by providing an alternative explanation that offers security and a sense of control, whilst gaining the attention and approval of others from the 'group'. It often may grant individuals with the potential to emerge from a status of anonymity and build the structure of their own self-esteem even if this does not reduce their anxiety or aversion to uncertainty.

This report is the first of two, and the literature and research field will continue to be examined over the next two years of the SMIDGE-project. To ensure that the final document will be both rigorous and comprehensive, all project partners will utilise their expertise and ongoing research to inform the systematic review that will follow this initial report. As has been noted, the lack of research into the motivations, characteristics and experiences of the 45-65 age group has not been studied in the context of misinformation, extremism and their influence on the democratic discourse. Therefore, the work in SMIDGE will enable greater insight and focus to be provided on this demographic, making the second deliverable a valuable resource for those working to counter extremism, and to educate the public. In this way, the SMIDGE project will provide the resources and insight to ensure that future policy is made that is evidence based, and that evidence includes the whole of society, even the middle-aged.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Explanation
Antisemitism	A perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.
Cognitive bias	distortions that people implement in their evaluations of facts and events and that tend to recreate their own subjective view that does not accurately correspond to reality. It represents how the human brain distorts reality.
Conspiracy theory	a belief that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people.
Counter-narrative	messaging that offers an alternative view to extremist recruitment and propaganda. Messaging can provide an alternative answer or path to potential recruits who may be seeking guidance or meaning. Counter-narrative messaging may also seek to deconstruct extremist narratives and expose logical flaws.
Disinformation	purposely created false/misleading information that is meant to manipulate or harm people, places and institutions, typically in pursuit of political, social or financial agendas.
Echo chambers	contexts and conditions that, on social media, lead to the creation of a state of ideological isolation of individuals, where news and sources with a confirmatory nature of individuals' views circulate.
Extremism	holding extreme political or religious views, often advocating illegal, violent, or other forms of extreme behavior.

Fake news	false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke.
Filter bubble	virtual environment based on a personal ecosystem of information satisfied by algorithms that each user constructs on the Internet through his or her preferred selections, characterised by low permeability to novelty and a high level of self-referentiality.
Hate speech	any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.
Ideology	set of beliefs or philosophies attributed to a person or group of persons.
Islamaphobia	fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims that lead to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims both in the online and offline world.
Islamism:	the belief in the need to establish a political order organized around sharia (Islamic law).
Middle age	period of human adulthood, between 45-65 years old.
Misinformation	dissemination of false or wrong content that does not presuppose any malicious intent.
Neo-Fascism	political movement that seeks to establish a racially or ethnically homogeneous society under a leader entrusted with authoritarian power.

Neo-Nazism	movement that endorses the racist, fascist, xenophobic ideology of Nazi Germany. Neo-Nazis typically view Jews as their primary enemy
Online extremism	beliefs that collectively provide a coherent worldview to support individuals, groups or movements in promoting violence and activities supporting violence.
Radicalisation	process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme views in opposition to a political, social or religious status quo, which could lead to acts of terrorism.
Vulnerability	conditions brought about by physical, psychological, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes that increase the susceptibility of an individual, community, assets, or systems to the impacts of threats.
White supremacy	belief in the supremacy of the white race over all others.

Table 1: Glossary of terms

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