

Quaderni di Comunità  
Persone, Educazione e Welfare  
nella società 5.0

Community Notebook  
People, Education, and Welfare  
in society 5.0

n. 1/2024

LA REPUTAZIONE NELL'ERA DIGITALE.  
RAPPRESENTAZIONI E PRATICHE DEL SÉ  
TRA CAPITALE SOCIALE E BENE RELAZIONALE

*a cura di*

Eleonora Sparano, Nicola Strizzolo, Martina Lippolis



Iscrizione presso il Registro Stampa del Tribunale di Roma  
al n. 172/2021 del 20 ottobre 2021

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Eurilink University Press srl  
Via Gregorio VII, 601 - 00165 Roma  
[www.eurilink.it](http://www.eurilink.it) - [ufficiostampa@eurilink.it](mailto:ufficiostampa@eurilink.it)  
ISBN: 979 12 80164 84 1  
ISSN: 2785-7697 (Print)

Prima edizione, settembre 2024  
Progetto grafico di Eurilink

È vietata la riproduzione di questo libro, anche parziale, effettuata  
con qualsiasi mezzo, compresa la fotocopia.

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## 2. REPRESENTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE BETWEEN ONLINE REPUTATION AND FAKE CHALLENGE

by Carlotta Antonelli\*

**Abstract:** *La proposta analizza la relazione tra fake news e social media challenge. Attraverso lo strumento metodologico dell'analisi del contenuto dei casi studio Jonathan Galindo, Momo Game e Blue Whale Challenge (Yin, 2018) si ricostruirà l'evoluzione del fenomeno nel rapporto tra notiziabilità e fake news, mostrando come il sistema dell'informazione cerchi di "modellare il discorso pubblico" attorno alle sfide giovanili online, offrendo corto-circuiti tra realtà e immaginazione (Bennato, 2018).*

**Abstract:** *The proposal analyses the relationship between fake news and social media challenges. Through the content analysis of the case studies Jonathan Galindo, Momo Game and Blue Whale Challenge (Yin, 2018) the evolution of the phenomenon in the relationship between newsworthiness and fake news will be reconstructed, showing how the information system tries to "shape the public discourse" around online youth challenges, offering short-circuits between reality and imagination (Bennato, 2018).*

**Parole chiave:** era digitale, reputazione online, rappresentazione mediale, fake news, social media challenge

**Keywords:** digital era, online reputation, media representation, fake news, social media challenge

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## 1. Introduction

The current information ecosystem and media consumption practices foster the creation and circulation of false or misleading content, referred to as fake news (Guess *et al.*, 2018). Fake news (Lanius and Jaster, 2018) is understood not only as «a specific form of intentionally fabricated content» (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017:213), but also as information with misleading intent, and to be traceable to the issue of online misinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). In order to contextualise the topics within the essay, it is useful to understand the reasons behind their spread with reference to Fake News Theory, which defines them as follows: the propagation in social media of inaccurate and tendentious information, spread by the ignorance of users, but generally orchestrated by more or less hidden centres (Volli, 2019). In recent years, fake news is more popular and spread by social media than by traditional ones (Balmas, 2014), an event correlated with their rapid development. This issue is motivated by the existence of a market for verifiably fake news, because (1) it is cheaper to produce fake news than accurate news, (2) it is complex for consumers to distinguish between accurate and fake news, and (3) users can refer to these to consolidate their beliefs.

There are two main reasons for the production of fake news: economic and ideological. The first relates to the intention to attract readers, which allows for increased advertising incomes associated with newspapers, news programmes, newspapers or online platforms (Kirby, 2016). The second can be traced to the intention to discredit certain social or institutional actors, sow discord or influence political choices (Bakir and McStay, 2018).

The motivations for sharing fake news are usually different from those that lead to its production, as web users spread fake content often unintentionally (Tandoc *et al.*, 2017). In this regard, it

is appropriate to introduce the distinction between the three meanings of misinformation made by Wardle and Derakshan (2017): (1) misinformation when false information is shared but is not intended to cause harm, (2) disinformation when it is knowingly shared to cause harm, and (3) malinformation when information is conditioned to cause harm by moving information intended to remain private into the public sphere.

In this perspective, misinformation is to be understood as unintentionally false, whereas disinformation is voluntarily false (Jack, 2017). Wardle (2019) identifies seven types of intentional misinformation, ranging from satire to misleading content and false contextual information, to content with falsified source information, manipulated content or even fabricated content. Similarly, Nielsen and Graves (2017), in focus groups with members of the fake news audience, distinguish between satire, bad journalism, propaganda, advertising or fake news (intentionally fabricated). They therefore interpret fake news as being part of a continuum of false or misleading information, not exclusively attributable to the intentional deception referred to in early studies on the subject. The effects of different types of fake news are varied; they can: undermine the reputation of individuals or organisations, confuse public discourse and influence political decisions, or even reduce public trust in the media in general (Van Duyn and Collier, 2019). The issue could be complicated by the risk of deep fakes, a new form of fake news, facilitated by the use of artificial intelligence (Hu *et al.*, 2022). Fake news can affect different areas; among them, social media challenges. Although such practices are in most cases recognised as playful challenges or trials that require special physical and/or artistic and creative skills (Burgess *et al.*, 2018), there are also challenges that may present varying degrees of risk to one's own and others' safety (Khasawneh, 2019).



The latter are often treated by the information privileging the risk dimension, which is little or not at all present in actual online practice. Social media challenges are also the subject of creative or emphatic narratives; they therefore appear worthy of attention from a socio-communicative perspective, with reference to performance studies, as these aim to highlight the ability to show ‘in action’ meanings and values belonging to a given culture, but also the social nature of the interactions that underlie them, thereby configuring what could represent the new digital version of ‘third spaces’ (Soukup, 2006). The essay intends to increase the literature on the subject (Lupariello *et al.*, 2018) focusing, on the one hand, on the role played by the digital age and social media in the spread of the phenomenon, and, on the other hand, on the construction of the media narrative of the events that concern this sphere, with reference to the practices that are carried out in the sphere by young people, often emphasising their symbolic (Giaccardi, 1993) and risk dimensions. In fact, ‘fake’ challenges find space in the mainstream information media because of their supposedly risky nature for young people, having, on the other hand, little or no online circulation. Fake challenges would therefore be totally or partially constructed by the media system, but have little or no online presence (since the contents, if proposed, would probably be censored by various social platforms). Online challenges that can be traced back to this domain include Blue Whale, Jonathan Galindo and Momo Game (Giordano, 2020), selected as belonging to suicide games (Mukhra *et al.*, 2019), i.e. challenges that would directly or indirectly invite potential users to commit suicide. Although there is no evidence that these exist, the narrative proposed by the media over time has contributed to fuelling the spread of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1972) in public opinion, activating, in the Italian context, concerns followed by due institutional reactions (Bada and Clayton, 2019). Here, it is useful to point out that the online challenges in

object are classifiable as misinformation, as they were not designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit (EC, 2018b). A further aim of the contribution is to identify the elements of recursiveness of the alleged challenges, in their journalistic representation, by reconstructing their path of birth, evolution and information dissemination in mainstream media and eventually social media. Among the elements of the construction of false challenges at risk, it is hypothesised that a central role is played, on the one hand, by perturbing content (Freud, 1919), which seems to activate that ‘moral panic’ that makes certain information appear worthy of attention among heterogeneous audiences, and, on the other hand, by the performative practices of the platform society (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018) that contribute to directing the attention of audiences in the direction of overcoming the relationship between reality and fake news (Bennato, 2018).

## *2. Theoretical framework*

Studies on fake news have focused on four main topics: the definition of the term, the scope of the phenomenon (Tandoc *et al.*, 2017); the research of the factors that influence the extent to which individuals give it credence (Pennycook *et al.*, 2018); and finally, the impact of fact checking to counter its effects (Bode and Vraga, 2018).

More limited seem to be the studies on their diffusion paths, especially in case they are constructed and disseminated by the media. Before dealing with them in detail, it is useful to provide a clarification of the basic characteristics of fake news, summarising them as follows: (1) amplitude, without any verification procedure, anyone can spread fake news on the Internet (Ahmed, 2017). A massive amount of fake content is distributed through online platforms, even without users’ awareness; (2) variety: there are

different definitions of fake news (fake information, fake advertisements and fake reviews). They can change the way people interact with real news; (3) speed: they tend to be short-lived (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Many fake news generators are nothing more than a passing flash to avoid detection by detection systems; they focus on current events and issues to attract users' attention. Continuing the analysis, it is possible to identify their basic components: (1) the creators/spreaders are either human or non-human. The first include both benevolent authors and users who publish fake news unintentionally, and malicious users who consciously create it; (2) the recipients are different (students, voters, parents, the elderly) depending on the purpose of the fake information. These are users of social media or other online news platforms; (3) social context: this refers to the system of activities and environment in which the dissemination of news takes place, the way data is distributed and the way online users interact. Today, the ways in which information is shared and disseminated are dominated by interactive social media technologies (Olteanu *et al.*, 2018). If a group of like-minded people post, share, forward information, the influence of this message can be amplified, an 'echo chamber effect'. This can facilitate the spread of fake news, as users are exposed to the social community in a distorted form (Shu *et al.*, 2017). A useful analysis to frame the phenomenon within the media landscape of recent years is that of Vargo and colleagues (2017), who adopt the intermediate agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002) and the Network Agenda-Setting (NAS) model, comparing, through content analysis, the agendas of fake news-producing channels, fact-checking sites and online news organisations, and hypothesising that fake news also becomes part of the hierarchy of topics deemed of interest. The study shows that content generated by fake news sites is on the rise, although their

influence in dictating the agenda of other media does not seem to be significant and is, in fact, slightly decreasing.

For Vosoughi *et al.* (2018), falsehood spreads further, faster, deeper and more widely than truth in all categories of information, because it is humans, and not robots, who spread it; cognitive biases are behind fake news. The reason for the success of fake news in relation to social media challenges may be the advent of the Internet and social media that has facilitated the dissemination of news, albeit of poor quality, particularly on social networks, where truth gives way to the virality of the content aimed at. A further factor in the success of this phenomenon concerns the crisis of the traditional media, increasingly deprived of their credibility and influence, which opens the way for new players that do not have the same training as professional journalists, in terms of quality, especially with regard to professional ethics. Important to this discussion is, then, the term 'irrational'. Like many concepts, people can often recognise the absence of something, even finding that they do not know what constitutes the essence of that absence. Thus, rationality seems a good contender in public discourse; ordinary epistemic agents are inclined to label certain argumentative forms or considerations as irrational, even if they turn out to have different ideas about what is quintessentially rational (Dentith, 2018). A foundational concern when referring to suicide (or games involving it) is the risk of 'contagion' (Magid and Dire, 2018), which could turn stories into a tragic self-fulfilling prophecy for a small number of vulnerable young people. On this topic, the term 'technopanic' highlights the exaggeration of sometimes real, sometimes non-existent risks in the digital world, connected to hi-tech adventures (Hung-Yi, 2008). This concept is not new; it has in fact accompanied all new technologies: from electricity to radio, to television. However, the digital technopanic has a specific feature that amplifies the new generation's immersion in new technologies and highlights parents'

unpreparedness for ‘digital parenting’ (Safe-net.bg, 2018). In this sense, exaggerating risk-taking on the part of young people and spreading fear only increases it for those who rely on their own perception rather than objective facts, directly impacting their behaviour in a negative direction (Morrongiello *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, exaggerated fears around online risk and official warnings have the effect of promoting the culture of challenge, pushing young people to seek it out, in the view that overcoming fear can be perceived as adventurous, or again, psychologically rewarding, giving a feeling of pleasure, especially after the success.

### *3. Research: methodological procedures*

The analysis of the case studies (Yin, 2018) was conducted through the content analysis of newspaper articles and online content collected down-stream of a *key-words webscraping* process. Before presenting the results, it is useful to provide a clarification of what is meant by ‘content analysis’ and what the main classifications are. The term refers to the analysis of language patterns and writing styles for both real and fake news in order to capture the most discriminating features for online fake news detection.

Current studies on news content analysis can be classified into:

- a) *Linguistic and semantic analysis* based on classical and scientific studies of language. By extracting useful information from news content, linguistic and semantic analysis can analyse language patterns, structures and associated meanings. (1a) *Linguistic analysis*: most fake news creators use specific writing strategies to avoid detection (Conroy *et al.*, 2015). The main objective of this

type of analysis is to verify the linguistic competence of the news creator by observing language formats and discovering writing strategies. (2a) *Semantic analysis*: this refers to the process of characterising the syntactic structures of news, from the level of sentences to that of semantics. For example, fake news creators often use exaggerated headlines to attract readers' attention, whereby the headline is usually unrelated or in conflict with the news content.

- b) *Knowledge-based analysis*: refers to attempts to directly check the veracity of the main claims in a news story (Shu *et al.*, 2017). External and professional sources, such as the knowledge of an expert or an organisation, are necessary to assign a truthful value to a news story, and artificial intelligence (AI)-based learning models are feasible solutions for evaluating online news. Although many innovative techniques for the automatic detection of fake news have recently been proposed, today's fact-checking tasks are still mainly dependent on human knowledge.
- c) *Style-based analysis*: can be divided into physical style analysis and non-physical style analysis. (1c) *Physical style analysis* is the process of extracting influential physical characteristics to distinguish fake news from real news. These characteristics may include the writing style, the syntax of the text, the personal attitude of the news, or the number of verbs and nouns, the number of emotive words and random words. (2c) *Non-physical style analysis* focuses on the non-physical aspects of news, such as the complexity and readability of the text (Horne and Adali, 2017). In this regard, as highlighted by the research of Banerjee *et al.* (2014), fake news creators usually take longer and make more mistakes when writing.

The research, making use of the approaches just described, analysed a corpus composed of 154 articles published in the online editions of the main Italian newspapers and 37 reports broadcast by the major national television news programmes over a period of thirteen months (from 1 January 2020 to 31 January 2021) with the aim of identifying the main *frames* present in the media narratives under investigation and reconstructing the narrative of the phenomenon of social media challenges, taking into consideration the different discursive typologies, the linguistic style of the news, the theme-words used to describe the phenomenon and the specificities of the corpus. To this end, a survey form inspired by a model used in a survey by Tipaldo (2007) was constructed to reread journalistic reports as complex objects made up of a formal-expressive level and a content level. The former is composed of two dimensions: the story told through variables such as the headline or, again, the news programme in which the news appeared, and the way in which the content transmitted is packaged. The content-focused analysis then accounts for two further dimensions: the structure of the discourse, detected through the tones and their style, and finally the positioning, ‘deployment’ of the headline in evaluative terms (Osgood, 1956) used to describe the practices. The following keywords were used to select the empirical material: ‘Blue Whale’, ‘Momo Challenge’, ‘Jonathan Galindo’. This resulted in 38 newspaper articles and three news reports (Table 1) useful for the analysis (Panarese, 2023).

Table 1: Overview of selected contents

<i>Newspaper/Television news</i>	<i>Number of contents</i>
Corriere della Sera	1
Fatto Quotidiano	4
Il Giornale	8
Il Messaggero	12
La Repubblica	4
La Stampa	4
Libero Quotidiano	5
Tg5	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>41</i>

Source: Research Youth risk-taking and social media challenges. Perception and experience of risk in online ‘dangerous games’, 2019

#### 4. Historical background of case studies: Blue Whale, Momo Game and Jonathan Galindo Challenge

The Blue Whale Challenge is recognised as one of the most notorious suicide games. It is a controversial phenomenon whose existence appears amplified or constructed by the media narrative that describes it as an alleged online ‘challenge’. The social challenge involves a series of self-damaging and dangerous activities (around 50) at the end of which a ‘curator’ would invite the ‘player’ to commit suicide. The origin of its media echo seems to lie in May 2016, following the dissemination of the report on online suicide discussion groups by broadcaster Russia Today. This was then followed by the publication of several reports entitled ‘The groups of death’ in the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* by the author Galina Mursalieva. The article offers a narrative of around one hundred and thirty teenage suicides in different Russian cities between November 2015 and April



2016, traced back to joining the online groups ‘whale’, ‘F57’, ‘F58’ within the Russian social network *Vkontakte*. In these groups, as previously mentioned, some adults defined as ‘curators’ would appear to invite teenagers to commit suicide through fifty tests to be passed, the last one often coinciding with jumping off the roof of a skyscraper, i.e. death. Following the publication of the article, content related to the figure of the ‘blue whale’ referred to in the name of the alleged challenge began to spread on social media, then, in November 2016, the challenge once again gained attention in the Russian news, the triggering event being the arrest of Philip Budeikin (one of the curators) on charges of inciting suicide. The paradox is that, despite the guilty plea, not even the curator was able to provide a real reconstruction of the events surrounding the alleged challenge (Lucarelli, 2017). However, the confusion around the Blue Whale phenomenon does not seem to have stopped: between February and March 2017, British newspapers and TV stations picked up on the contents of a Russian site about the affair, without verifying the sources, raising the attention on the challenge internationally. Moreover, no confirmation was found for many of the stories told in Galina Mursalieva’s article (Torrise and Zitelli, 2017). In Italy, news of the Blue Whale began to circulate from June 2016 in a handful of newspapers, some cautious in their description of the challenge, others faithful to the (unconfirmed) narrative offered by Mursalieva. In particular, knowledge of the alleged challenge was amplified by a journalistic investigation conducted by Matteo Viviani within the TV programme *Le iene*, in which a suicide that took place in Livorno was arbitrarily linked to Russian teenage suicides that occurred years earlier and were described by *La Novaya Gazeta*. The episode provoked widespread media coverage on both social and traditional media, giving rise to a polarised and polarising debate between fear of the challenge and contestation of its validity. On the other hand, the author of the investigation later admitted that some of the sources

used were false or unverified, but since then the phenomenon has gone viral. To conclude the focus on the alleged challenge, it should be noted that Italy holds second place in the world for online searches with keywords such as 'BlueWhale', 'Bluewhalegame', 'curatorfindme' or 'I'mwhale' (17.7% after the United States with 18%). 27% of those using the keywords analysed were 17 years old or younger, while 67% were over 35 years old.

Momo Game (Kobilke and Markiewitz, 2021) is the name of another alleged online challenge, spread over the Internet in 2018. A phenomenon regarded as a dangerous game typically played by young people, widespread in the United Kingdom and the United States. The challenge refers to a creepy figure linked to a WhatsApp account called Momo, who, once contacted, shares frightening images with potential users, assigning dangerous tasks, prompting, again, 'players' to self-harm and eventually suicide. According to the narrative offered about the alleged challenge, participants who refuse to perform the task would receive threats to the safety of their family members or the disclosure of private information. The figure of Momo is a replica of the sculpture 'Mother Bird', created in 2016 by Japanese artist Keisuka Aisawa. Even for this challenge, journalistic media (in Argentina) advanced the hypothesis of a link, later denied, between a suicide and the alleged challenge. Attention to the Momo Challenge then shifted to India and Europe, where, in 2019, British newspapers gave prominence to a few concerned online narratives. At the end of February, there were then discussions about alleged children's videos on the YouTube platform in which Momo's image surprisingly appeared, a fact later denied by the platform administrators. Nevertheless, Kim Kardashian, a well-known influencer, continued to mention the alleged defiance in some stories on Instagram, making it a viral content among her followers and internationally.

The latest case of research interest to have attracted the attention of public opinion and the national and international media was the Jonathan Galindo Challenge. Considered to be akin to the Momo Game, this alleged online challenge has been associated with a series of self-defeating trials of increasing intensity and capable of endangering the lives of possible participants. The most plausible hypothesis is that the name Jonathan Galindo refers to a fictional character, to whom numerous fictitious social accounts would be linked, created with the aim of capturing the attention of younger users in order to induce them to take part in a supposed online ‘game’ (Dalla Casa, 2020; Lincos, 2020). Besides using the same fictional name, such social profiles would also make use of a common image depicting a man with a made-up face replicating the image of Goofy, the famous Disney character. Tracing the same dynamics of the Momo Challenge, it was discovered that this disguise has no connection with the hypothetical game associated with it. It is, in fact, a mask created in 2012 for playful and personal purposes by the American make-up artist Samuel Catnipnik, who on several occasions, reporting its theft, declared his extraneousness to the facts connected with the Jonathan Galindo Challenge. However, the first appearance of the name Jonathan Galindo can be traced back to 2017, when it began to circulate on the web and to be linked to stories called *creepypasta*, i.e. stories born on the web from distressing images, gradually modified by users, with the aim of making them more and more frightening and spread by word of mouth online. However, it was between 2019 and 2020 that the name Jonathan Galindo made a significant comeback on the main social networking platforms, especially TikTok and Instagram. According to a reconstruction made by Sofia Lincos, as with the Momo game, the challenge went viral thanks to the publication of videos by the Mexican influencer Carlos Name. Since this event, accounts with similar names have multiplied, some created as a joke, others to

monetise the success of the character, others as fan pages, others to spread horror videos. In Italy, the alleged challenge landed in July 2020, with the first news referring to four cases in Ancona and its province, reported by parents who, when talking to the police, reported contact to their children's social profiles by accounts called 'Jonathan Galindo', with an invitation to participate in extreme challenges. After this first wave, the online practice once again catalysed the attention of the Italian media at the end of September 2020, following its connection with the death of an eleven-year-old boy in Naples, although there was no firm evidence to support this hypothesis. The dissemination dynamics highlighted so far suggest that this online challenge may also be false and that this incident has been wrongly attributed to it, despite the fact that media reports have tried to link this episode to the Jonathan Galindo Challenge, as already found for Blue Whale and Momo Game. Therefore, in the words of Sofia Lincos, the Jonathan Galindo Challenge seems «little more than an urban legend, a worrying rumour revived by the media and some social control agencies, destined to be forgotten as soon as people stop talking about it in alarmed tones» (Lincos, 2020).

##### *5. Lexicometric analysis: representation offered by newspapers and TG reports. A complicated balance between reputation and newsworthiness*

Several times in the essay, reference was made to the issue of the unverifiability of the challenges in question, alongside the mainstream media's need to report the news. The content analysis, set out above, reports the emphatic tone of the representations offered. However, in order to meet the need for more in-depth analysis, this section will report the main findings from the lexicometric analysis (Di Franco, 2011), with reference to the theme

words, i.e. those most frequently used to explain the phenomenon. Before offering the main results of the analysis, it is appropriate to clarify in what terms the theme of reputation will be analysed within this discussion. It must be read on a double track: on the one hand, with reference to the image that the mainstream media offer of the social world and the users who inhabit it, and on the other hand, considering the lack of verifiability of the facts reported for newsworthiness reasons.

The following is the narrative offered by the main newspapers (Corriere della Sera, Fatto Quotidiano, Il Giornale, Il Messaggero, La Repubblica, La Stampa, Libero Quotidiano, Il Sole 24 Ore). The most frequent topic words (Table 2) can be grouped into four macro categories: the first refers to minors ('child' in all its declinations, 'adolescents', 'young people'); the second refers to participation in social challenges ('social', 'challenge', 'TikTok', 'Jonathan Galindo'), often connected to the theme of risk and danger ('suicide', 'death', 'hospital'); in the background, finally, reference is made to investigations ('public prosecutor's office', 'police') into the death of a little girl ('Antonella', 'Palermo') whose death, as in the case of the child in Naples, was erroneously connected to participation in a challenge, the truth of which was never ascertained. In addition, the image of families ('family', 'mother') who are often incapable or helpless in the face of the spread of this phenomenon is portrayed. The news is frequently reported accentuating a dimension of danger in a world that is at times incomprehensible and insurmountable, the potentially boundless social world, which in these narratives seems to lose all positive meaning. In fact, social is no longer the technology accessible to all, but connects us with the unknown, fuelling that 'moral panic' to which reference has been made and will be made several times. This aspect is even more evident in the narratives offered by the television news (Table 3) which refer to 'suicide' by correlating the 'death' of a child with the 'social' 'challenge' 'Jonathan'

‘Galindo’, or again the theme is treated with reference to another death, that of the ‘little girl’ of Palermo, as a result of participation in an alleged social challenge.

Table 2: Topic words newspapers

Forma	Freq. ↓	POS
social	229	nr
anni	174	nom
tiktok	172	nr
genitori	153	nom
challenge	151	nr
sfida	141	nom
video	115	adj
gioco	114	nom
bambina	104	nom
vita	93	nom
morte	86	nom
bambini	84	nom
bambino	84	nom
età	80	nom
sfide	80	nom
suicidio	80	nom
prima	77	adj
giovani	76	adj
antonella	75	nr
mondo	72	nom
palermo	71	nr
ragazzi	70	nom
utenti	70	nom
tik	66	nr
tok	66	nr
proprio	65	adv
galindo	62	nr
procura	62	nom
famiglia	60	nom
contenuti	56	nom
jonathan	56	nr
rete	56	nom
adolescenti	55	nom
ospedale	55	nom
cellulare	51	adj
piattaforma	51	nom
fatto	50	ver
polizia	50	nom
uomo	50	nom
piccola	49	adj
web	48	nr
mamma	46	nom

Table 3: Topic words TG reports

Forma	Freq. ↓	POS
social	57	nr
tiktok	48	nr
anni	42	nom
genitori	36	nom
minori	24	adj
palermo	24	nr
utenti	23	nom
sfida	22	nom
garante	20	nom
bambini	18	nom
morte	17	nom
suicidio	17	nom
bambina	16	nom
antonella	15	nr
morta	15	ver
privacy	15	nom
vita	15	nom
istigazione	14	nom
tragedia	14	nom
dati	12	nom
polizia	12	nom
procura	12	nom
bambino	11	nom
gioco	11	nom
ragazzi	11	nom
account	10	nr
blocco	10	nom
casa	10	nom
cellulare	10	adj
disposto	10	ver
figli	10	nom
giovani	10	adj
network	10	nom
proprio	10	adv
sfide	10	nom
video	10	adj
perch	9	nr
solì	9	nom
adolescenti	8	nom
aperto	8	ver
bimba	8	nom
challenge	8	nr

Source: Iramuteq data analysis, 2020

The trend is even more visible when analysing for TG reports the co-occurrences and for newspapers the specificities. On the TV news, the following co-occurrences associated with the word 'challenge' can be found: 'child', 'TikTok', 'young', 'dying', 'dangerous', 'Palermo'. With reference to the specific challenge Jonathan Galindo, we find words such as: 'goofy', 'character' and 'profiles', and finally the word 'blue whale' which refers to the fact that the two alleged challenges are treated together, on the one hand in order to account for a highly dangerous phenomenon, in which often 'victims' are 'children', 'young people' or 'adolescents', and on the other hand for reasons essentially related to the packaging of the news, as several times mentioned. With regard to the Blue Whale challenge, the co-occurrences found are: 'whale', 'momo' (referring to the Momo Game), 'Jonathan Galindo', 'self-harm', 'small', 'young' and 'suicide'. Finally, associated with the word 'Antonella' we can find the following terms: 'child', 'small', 'parent', 'tiktok', 'palermo', 'social', 'dying'. With regard to the specificities of the individual newspapers researched, there are some differences depending on the newspaper, with reference to the words chosen to account for the phenomenon, which will be discussed below. By way of example, the newspaper 'Il Giornale' chooses to place greater emphasis on the need to find the 'answer' of the 'experts' to this phenomenon, in order to help 'parents' to prevent 'minors' from being further 'victims' of 'suicide', like 'Antonella', the little girl from Palermo. The 'Libero Quotidiano' decides to focus on the media echo of the alleged challenges, giving more space to both the 'Blue Whale' and 'Jonathan Galindo', while the 'Fatto Quotidiano' pays more attention to the second challenge, returning words such as 'goofy', 'mask', 'investigators', 'police' and 'minors'. Continuing the analysis, for 'Il Messaggero' the specificities are: 'attempt', 'death', 'fear', 'game', 'minors'. 'La Repubblica', on the other hand, focuses more on the social side and on the fact that 'young people' can be the object of

‘consequences’, in search of ‘challenges’ and ‘views’, in order to receive the consent of peers or in general to be approved by society. ‘Il Sole 24 Ore’, on the other hand, still connected to the ‘views’ side, refers to the ‘Tik Tok’ ‘profiles’ and to the ‘measures’ that were taken at that time by the ‘guarantor’ to protect minors and their ‘privacy’. Instead, ‘La Stampa’ chooses to shift the attention to the ‘minors’ side, but with an even different meaning, referring to the role possibly played by ‘families’ (the ‘responsibility’) in the management of the ‘problem’, to ensure that another case like that of ‘Antonella’, alleged victim of a social challenge, does not occur again. Finally, the ‘Corriere Della Sera’ returns, in emphatic tones, the ‘cases’ of ‘children’ ‘victims’ of ‘tragedies’ due to the obscure social world. It is interesting to note that in this narrative there is no trace of the actual social world, where, as we will read more extensively in the conclusive considerations, the pages dedicated to these challenges are often opened by users to minimise the phenomenon, out of goliardia, or for greater popularity. Finally, a further aspect deserving attention is the failure to take into account the real users of social networks, who were never asked about their preferences or ways of using the social network itself, or even about their experience with reference to their actual participation in the challenges.

## *6. Results and conclusion*

The genesis, dissemination and narrative of the three cases analysed in the media reveal elements that refer to the production of news constructed, in whole or in part, to respond to the logic of the platform ecosystem (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). Their dissemination, then, appears to be oriented by a competitive information system, despite scarce economic resources; for this reason, even newspapers are induced to publish news of interest, shareable online for a wide



audience (Bakir and McStay, 2018), despite the detriment of information quality (Paulussen and Harder, 2014). Alleged online challenges are often associated with news events, a recurring object in the construction of fake news (Agcom, 2018). Associated with this aspect is a further critical issue, namely the interdependent relationship between the information system and the disinformation system, with reference to new media and technologies. Thus, topics such as social media challenges – a phenomenon typical of the participatory culture of digital environments – suffer from a lack of verification and accuracy in the journalistic sphere, alongside ideologically oriented prejudices. Equally relevant, then, is the discontinuity of media coverage, which usually peaks at the time of tragic events, and then fades out (Agcom, 2018). The results can be read in accordance with the literature on the subject, confirming that the alleged challenges are not at all or not very present on the web: Facebook, Instagram and TikTok users refer to these challenges as a fake, or alternatively associate the challenge images with groups and pages that have a goliardic purpose. Moreover, the phenomenon is less present on the web than in the mainstream media, and there is an increasing presence of social pages with awareness-raising tools and alerts to protect users. The journalistic representations on the subject in the period under investigation returned almost all the references to the Jonathan Galindo Challenge in 25 articles and 3 news reports, broadcast and edited in the time span from 30 September 2020 to 6 October 2020 and essentially related, directly or indirectly, to the case of the suicide of the child in Naples, a result that confirms, once again, the media echo covered by this event. This explains the residual attention devoted to the Blue Whale and the Momo Challenge, found in the corpus under investigation; in fact, only a few mentions of other alleged challenges were found in the mainstream media. From the totality of the analysed contents, it emerges that only two articles are characterised by a descriptive-

discursive style, while in the rest of the empirical material an emotional-suggestive tone is found. This is in line with the vast space reserved by the media for the emotional component. In this scenario, in fact, the contents expressing a position of contrariety in the narratives offered on the social challenge phenomenon are predominant. Departing from the trend are in fact only two cases that preserve a neutral approach in the narration. In the analysis, then, reference is often made to young people and their vulnerability in the construction of the news by the mainstream media; the alleged challenges (Blue Whale and Jonathan Galindo) are also often mistakenly associated, with the former being recognised as ‘related’ to the latter. A further aspect of reflection offered by the empirical material is to be found, in particular, in the tendency to correlate the possible involvement of young people in such ‘tests of courage’ and the supposedly dramatic consequences thereof, although, even today, there is still no certainty as to the support of this hypothesis. On the media side, it is useful to refer to the dimension of newsworthiness (Harcup and O’neill, 2017) and its criteria in the narratives of the episodes dealt with (Blue Whale, Momo Game and Jonathan Galindo Challenge). As an example, as mentioned several times, the topic of youth suicides has always been able to catalyse and attract public attention (Bennato, 2018).

On this topic, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has published guidelines for journalists that include, among others, criteria for packaging quality news, such as avoiding large or sensationalist headlines, prominent positioning of suicide reports, or not describing recent suicides as an ‘epidemic’, or using other strong terms (AFSP, 2016). In fact, hyper-communication is often no guarantee of the quality of communication (Wolton, 2016); on the contrary, it generates a sense of inadequacy, placing us in a state of deficit. In this context, attention to the universe of media must be accentuated, since multiplatform content is part of minors’

communicative diet. Media operators should become aware of their responsibilities, which imply the assimilation of the ethical dimension as a daily practice, especially for the protection of minors. A final result that emerged from the research material concerns the presence of further elements of recursiveness in the construction of false challenges, which can essentially be summarised as follows:

- the theft of a pre-existing image, recalling the dimension of the uncanny as described in Freud's famous work (1919). In these terms, we could speak of a uncanny misinformation, since it originates where the boundary between fantasy and reality becomes blurred, showing our eyes the possibility of a reality hitherto only present in the dimension of the fantastic, understood as something familiar that has been removed;
- play is often associated with young people, with reference to concerns about their health (and implicitly about the future of society);
- there is always the figure of an external curator who should suggest tasks to the players with increasing risk-taking;
- it was impossible to verify the actual participation of users in the challenge (the news was reported by a potentially reliable but unverified source);
- the news narrative path is similar for all the challenges considered, constituent elements of which are in fact: the media, institutions and law enforcement agencies.

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