Democracies in global health emergencies: the *blurring effect* of social media

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Abstract

This paper argues that social media can have a direct and strong effect on the management of a crisis, such as the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, by interfering with the information provided by governments to face such an event, undermining the transparency efforts provided. In this sense, the theoretical concept of "blurring effect" of social media is theorised and applied to the case studies of Italy and China, highlighting how social media can have different effects in a democracy and in an authoritarian regime, in relation to their levels of transparency.

Keywords: Democracy, Outbreak, Social Media, Transparency, Blurring Effect

1 Introduction

On the eve of the new decade, the world already finds itself facing a complicated crisis with consequences that are still unforeseeable: the international community is in fact fighting the outbreak of the novel SARS-CoV-2, a newly discovered coronavirus originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan and discovered around the last days of December 2019 (Li, 2020) As this paper is being written, the emergency is still vivid in the majority of the countries and has not reached its peak yet (especially in Europe), although some signs of improvement are coming from the very epicentre of the disease, Mainland China, where the latest reports showed a sudden decrease in the infected number at the beginning of March and where President Xi Jinping recently visited the epicentre of the crisis, Wuhan, to announce that "the war is almost won" (Santevecchi, 2020); nevertheless, the scenario is still evolving hour by hour and the crisis is far from being solved. Although the virus is only a few months old at the moment, its diffusion quickly became a global matter with immediate effects on economics and politics. For this reason, from an academic perspective, this situation can already pave the way to a large amount of interesting reflections on our society, creating the conditions to rethink some of the assumptions about the democratic systems dominating especially in the Western world. In this perspective, this paper offers to take inspiration from this new global emergency to investigate the efficiency of democracies in managing such situations, confronted to the approach used in regimes that are recognised as authoritarian; while analysing the two perspectives through the considerations of appropriate case studies, the focus will be in particular posed on the influence that technology (and in particular social media) had, is having and will have in the struggle against SARS-CoV-2. In fact, social media are currently playing a major role in this event and their effect is probably the most important element to take into account in the drawing up of an original research question: their impact will be analysed considering the recent developments both in democracies, where governments do not openly pose restrictions on them, and in authoritarian regime, where governments actually do control these channels: in this light, the main interest will be laid on how technology can influence the level of transparency, both in a democracy and in an authoritarian state, and it will be investigated whether this specific influence actually has an impact on the outcomes of a global crisis in a democracy. As a result, the research question of this paper can be formulated as it follows: to what extent can technology, and in particular social media, influence the management of a global health emergency by affecting a democracy's transparency? The paper will be therefore divided into four paragraphs (including the introduction) where, initially, the status quo (as of the 15 th of March, date of final submission of the paper) will be described referring to the latest news, studies and publications, before moving to the presentation of the theoretical frameworks considered to analyse the case studies selected; then, with a complete overview on the general situation, the actual case studies will be introduced and analysed in light of the theories and of the research question, in order to develop more precise theoretical assumptions and concepts that will be exposed in the findings part and remarked in the conclusion, in order to propose an hypothetical answer to the research question. Although this work is elaborated taking inspiration from a few other studies and articles addressing the issue of democracy and health emergencies, the underlying opinion expressed in this paper is that it is not possible to certainly state whether democracies work better than authoritarian

regimes in the management of health emergencies, or vice versa, unlike some of the cited contributions aim to do (Ruger, 2015; Kavanagh, 2020; Berengaut, 2020). Instead, this paper, while proposing a hopefully original research question, is written with the intention of adding some reflections not necessarily on the specific management of the SARS-CoV- 2 outbreak, for which it is too early to formulate meaningful judgements, but rather on the link between democracy and health emergencies, for which a literature gap has already been individuated (Ruger, 2015), adding into the consideration the element of the "digital age" in which, currently, democracy is living and because of which needs to adapt and reinvent itself. In this light, the paper argues that the influence of social media on transparency is an obstacle for democracies in the management of a health emergency and that therefore, with a high degree of probability, democracies all over the world have higher difficulties in managing the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic then authoritarian states, if this element is underestimated.

2   Case Study Analysis, Theoretical Framework and Timeline of Events

An exhaustive and meaningful analysis on this topic requires to take into consideration some case studies; in this sense, the cases of Italy and China have been deemed useful to compare. This choice might be questioned, as Italy and China differ in a multitude of elements (economically, culturally or, more simply, in terms of population and surface: elements that might be relevant in the specific case of a virus outbreak), and because the comparison between a democracy and an authoritarian state might look arduous and unprofitable; nevertheless, the two countries are arguably suitable for a significant comparison. Indeed, China and Italy are among the "main protagonists" as they are two of the countries that count most of the cases worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020) and the comparison between an authoritarian regime and a democracy might emphasise democracies' qualities, allowing to reason better on them. With this said, for intellectual honesty, it is necessary to point out that the two case studies are not intended as "models" of democracy and of authoritarian states, and that distinct democracies might act differently (in fact, at the moment, the emergency is spreading significantly also in other democracies and it is possible that not all of them will take the same measures that Italy decided to take), and so might happen with autocracies; nevertheless, what is of interest of this paper is to analyse the role of transparency in the two systems and to evaluate how technology (with a particular focus on social media) is influencing it to answer to the research question. In this respect, a concept framework composed by two theories can help to delve into the topic successfully and to develop a meaningful argument. Firstly, a theory published by O'Malley, Rainford and Thompson (2009) allows to give an interpretation of the current events, by individuating in the element of transparency the crucial requisite for a successful management of public health emergencies from a state. In this light, the recent events occurred in the two countries can be inspected, highlighting the main differences and similarities that can be then observed under the lens of the second theoretical framework. In fact, in order to assess the role of technology in influencing the transparency in the two cases, a set of concepts elaborated by Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà (2017) will be used, as the authors provide a framework describing social media

through "definitions" of technology, which are Liberation Technology, Repression Technology and Tumultuous Technology (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, Barberà, 2017): under these definitions, the role of social media in China and Italy during the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak will be assessed to finally provide a more accurate answer to the research question. As it is easy to imagine, the literature around the SARS-CoV-2 topic is currently extremely limited, given the novelty of the outbreak and also the "complexity of the health-politics nexus" (Ruger, 2015) that, in general, poses challenging questions to be tackled in similar scenarios; however, as the medical knowledge around the virus increases, the political reactions around the globe evolve, paving the way for further reflections also from an academic point of view (which are daily increasing on prestigious medical publications such as The Lancet). This aspect also justifies the large use of online newspaper articles as references for this paper, which are among the most important sources from which it is possible to understand the daily facts and, therefore, to reinterpret the situation, also by adding some thoughts by virtue of the personal experience lived currently in first person in Italy. Nevertheless, the relation between democracy and health emergencies, in a more general way, has already been addressed by some scholars (for instance by Ruger, 2015) and, with the new circumstances, many reflections are currently considering them on online magazines all over the world, taking into account also some contribution written about some other emergencies such as the 2003's SARS epidemic among all (Ruger, 2015; Berengaut, 2020); taking into consideration those events also in this paper will help to overcome the lack of literature and to give a more complete picture of the issue. What it is interesting to observe among the available literature, anyway, is the tendency to condemn the modus operandi typical of the authoritarian states: while Ruger (2015), by analysing three historical episodes for the Chinese history (the 1958-1961's famine, the SARS outbreak and the HIV/AIDS epidemic) reveals "...a lack of civil liberties, political rights, and freedom of the press that have dramatically impacted the population's health" (Ruger, 2015), Berengaut (2020) recently described the People's Republic of China's political system as "incompatible" in an international collaboration approach against infectious diseases, claiming that democracy are more likely to work together (Berengaut, 2020). As stated in the introduction, this paper does not aim to judge which of the two systems is better in overcoming a health emergency, but it can only add some reflections on the wider topic and especially it is not able to provide a completely valid interpretation of the situation under the specific SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, as the scenario is still unpredictably evolving.

2.0.1   The Events

In December 2019 some cases of a viral pneumonia generated by an unknown cause started to be registered in the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan, in the Hubei region (Li, 2020); by the last days of the year, Chinese doctors investigating the cases attributed the disease to a novel typology of coronavirus, suspected to have developed in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market and similar to the one that caused the SARS epidemic in 2003, and reported the emergency to the National Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the first days of the new year, renaming the virus SARS-CoV-2 (Li, 2020). The virus started to spread all around Mainland China in the following weeks, and managed to be silently "exported" in other parts of the world, for instance to Germany, where the first case was registered in

the city of Munich on the 27th of January ("Bayerische Behörden bestätigen ersten Fall in Deutschland", 2020), causing what it is suspected to be the first European hotbed to feed the massive Italian outbreak, which has started officially on the 18th of February ("Coronavirus, in Germania a gennaio il primo contagiato europeo: "Da lui l'infezione fino in Italia"", 2020); in the first days of March, the number of infected all over Europe had a sudden increase, forcing the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the state of pandemic on March 11th (Ducharme, 2020), in order to express the need of conforming and tightening up the measures to be taken by governments all over the globe. In this regard, Italy and China can be seen as models to follow, because China is on the right track to contain the virus spreading, while the Italy can be taken as an example in terms of underestimation of the matter, although the drastic measures taken by Giuseppe Conte's government received the appreciation by the World Health Organization's Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus ("Coronavirus, l'Oms ringrazia l'Italia (e twitta Repubblica): "State reagendo energicamente, siamo con voi"", 2020) and have been replicated by other European countries. Other than the actual emergency policies that have been adopted by the two countries, what is interesting to look at to accomplish to the goal of this paper is the level of transparency of the two governments and to which extent the influence of social media on it caused a better or a worse management of the emergency until now; in fact, under this aspect, the two situations are very different and outlined opposite outcomes.

2.0.2   China

The hypothesis of a new disease similar to SARS was firstly elaborated by Dr. Li Wenliang, a 34 years old ophthalmologist who, while visiting a patient, observed some symptoms compatible to the illness that caused the 2003's epidemics and reported it to some colleagues through the instant messaging app WeChat, but some screenshot of the conversations were intercepted by the authorities and the whistle-blower was reprimanded by the Public Security Bureau in Wuhan, where he was summoned and obliged to sign a statement in which he was accused of disturbing the public order through the spread of false affirmations (Green, 2020). After returning to work and before tragically dying because of a pneumonia caused by the same virus he discovered, Dr. Li Wenliang released an interview to the New York Times, released by the newspaper on February 7th (just in the middle of the epidemic and on the same day of his death), where he expressed his discouragement towards the restricting measures of the Chinese government, while revealing that the situation would have been more controlled, calling for more openness and transparency ("He Warned of Coronavirus. Here's What He Told Us Before He Died", 2020). The lack of transparency in authoritarian regimes is nothing new, and the Chinese experience in particular is rich in examples where the strict information control from the central government had severe and controversial effects. In this respect, some scholars blamed this attitude from the central Chinese government for the tragic effects of events such as the 1958-1961 famine or the 2003 SARS outbreak, during which the Communist Party, by controlling the media, successfully covered up the spread of news regarding a new disease, delaying the development of a defence mechanism and holding citizens back from taking precautions (Ruger, 2015). As the story of the whistle-blower Dr. Li Wenliang proves, the behaviour of the Chinese government does not seem to have changed in occasion of this novel outbreak, provoking even more catastrophic effects that

currently culminating in a global crisis. This "authoritarian blindness" caused a solvable problem to turn into a durable crisis (Tufekci, 2020), but is the same attitude that allowed the government to lockdown the whole city of Wuhan in a record time, restricting and strictly controlling its 11 million citizens' movements; these draconian measures apparently worked in containing the virus spreading, as the Hubei region counted no increases in the infection count since the first days of March (Santevecchi, 2020). The Chinese management of the outbreak shows then a low level of transparency, but a higher level of efficiency in solving the crisis, both products of the authoritarian ruling of the country. This situation is perfectly interpretable in light of the theory elaborated by O'Malley, Rainford and Thompson (2009), as the authors talk about that "reluctance by authorities to acknowledge and communicate a potential problem in the first stages of the outbreak aided in the quick global spread of the disease" (O'Malley, Rainford, Thompson, 2009) referring to the 2003 SARS crisis, but exposing a concept that is perfectly suitable with nowadays' circumstances. This theory also provides a crucial element, other than the authoritarian character of the country itself, that might explain the lack of transparency: it is possible that China, one of the most important growing economies in the world, preferred to "...withhold information that is potentially damaging to an economic sector – often against the recommendation of public health experts" (O'Malley, Rainford, Thompson 2009). Nevertheless, as stated, China provided a steady response to the crisis and, despite losing lives and reaching a high number of infected, prepared the full recovery rather quickly, while in Italy the situation is diametrically opposed.

2.0.3   Italy

Italy officially registered the first two cases, a Chinese couple of tourists, on the 30th of January and only another case, all of them coming from China and successfully isolated and cured preventing further spreads, until the 18th of February ("Covid-19 - Situazione in Italia", 2020). The Italian authorities, on the same day of the confirmation of the positivity of the two tourists, blocked all the flights incoming from China and, the day after, declared the state of emergency for the country ("Covid-19 - Situazione in Italia", 2020). In this sense, the Italian government expressed a complete transparency from the very beginning of the emergency in the country, acting in an opposite way compared to how China reacted (although the outbreak was already well known around the globe and therefore would have been more difficult to hide); the efforts are still carried out punctually and precisely every day, as the government declares daily the numbers of the pandemic in terms of new infected, new deaths and new recovered, through reliable reports that enable epidemiologists to predict the curve of the virus, help researchers to gather information for a cure and allow citizens to better protect themselves (Berengaut, 2020). Nevertheless, the debates around the disease flourished, between scientists underestimating the risks and virologists warning the population to protect itself from a lethal disease; this influenced the level of transparency and challenged the government to give clear guidelines, becoming a perfect example fitting O'Malley, Rainford and Thompson's theory when they state that a challenge that holds back a government to announce a potential health threat is the scientific confirmation of the risks (O'Malley, Rainford, Thompson, 2009). Therefore, until the crisis exploded with the now notorious case of the "Paziente uno" (translatable in English with "Patient one"), the initial transparency provided by the government in an official manner has been blurred by

heated debates carried out by politicians, virologists or, more simply, common people, that expressed themselves through the traditional media and especially via internet, resulting in a chaotic landscape that made the first days of the true emergency tumultuous and confusing. This freedom of speech and the moderation of different voices was also reflected in the political context; in fact, unlike in the authoritarian People's Republic of China where the Communist Party takes all the decisions, Italy is a democracy where applying Wuhan-like measures is not an easy resolution, because although they are likely to solve the problem in the long run, they are disruptive for the economy and they limit individual's liberty in the short term, becoming unpopular measures that politicians tend to postpone as much as they can (Famularo, 2020). As a result, the Italian government stalled for too long before isolating the eleven cities in Lombardy believed to be the main hotspot for the country's own outbreak and the time lost translated into the final urge to quarantine every Italian citizen in their homes, restricting their movements to the minimum essential until the 4th of May, and punishing the noncompliant as criminal offenders, technically limiting the freedom of citizens (in some parts of the country even with the help of the army) to move in their own country ("Decreto #IoRestoaCasa, domande frequenti sulle misure adottate dal Governo", 2020). Italy, a democratic country, has found therefore itself in the position of forcing their citizens with authoritarian-like measures to fight the spread of SARS-CoV-2; although this does not make Italy an authoritarian regime as these extreme measures are needed in this emergency time (and most likely will not bring the country to become one after the emergency), this is an element of reflection, especially in light of the literature condemning the measures taken in China (Ruger, 2015).

2.0.4   The Blurring Effect

As emerged from the case study comparison, and considering the uncertain scenario drawn by the crisis, it is not possible to give a straightforward judgement on which system (democracy or authoritarianism) has better managed the outbreak and is more adapt to do so in an hypothetical future, although some publications already expressed their opinions (Berengaut, 2020); nevertheless, is not too arduous to describe the role that technology, and in particular social media, had in the two countries in relation to the outbreak, especially in relation with the transparency. The events concerning the SARS-Cov-2 perfectly showed how technology in China can be Liberation Technology or Repression Technology, perfectly suiting in the theoretical framework chosen for this analysis and developed by Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà (2017). In such an autocratic regime, where telecommunications are strictly controlled by the leading party, a "simple" act as the one carried by Dr. Li Wenliang had the full potential to become an example of Liberation Technology, because such a sensitive information about a possible novel virus outbreak ". . . can put sustained pressure on elites, an essential requirement not only for the process of democracy-building, but also for keeping a given issue on the agenda" (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, Barberà, 2017). Nonetheless, as the conversation between him and his colleagues, that was meant to be a private conversation on WeChat (Green, 2020) was discovered by the local authorities, the Internet expressed a feature typical of a Repression Technology, as the 34 years old ophthalmologist was targeted and intimidated with the accusation of spreading false news, in the government's effort to undermine online freedom (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, Barberà, 2017). What happened

in Italy is completely different, because the government does not limit online freedom of its citizens in this way; on the contrary, paradoxically, the liberty to express opinions and to publish contents and thoughts on the Internet is what blurred the initial transparency provided about the presence of the virus in the country. Before the SARS-CoV-2 virus effectively arrived in the country, social media (in particular Twitter) played the role of prominent discussion arena around the topic. Based on the news arriving from the epicentre of the outbreak, doctors (but also "common people") tried to interpret the behaviour of the new virus, developing different opinions on the importance of the matter and generating genuine "online clashes" that are still currently taking places, especially among the most famous doctors and virologists ("Coronavirus, scontro tra virologi: Burioni attacca la collega del Sacco. Ilaria Capua: "Non c'è da piangere né da ridere"", 2020). Other than dividing the population according to their opinion, social media also played a role in unifying the country through pleas sent by politicians and celebrities: at the very beginning of the epidemic, while spreading information on how to maintain a correct personal hygiene to avoid the infection, the message sent was to not panic and to continue living life as always ("Coronavirus, Sala: "Serve positività, riaprire i musei". Duomo di Milano aperto da lunedì. Cirio in Piemonte: "Ora ritorno a normalità"", 2020). Nevertheless, with the staggering increase of the infections, also affecting those who encouraged to live a normal life, for instance the Democratic Party's secretary Nicola Zingaretti, ("Coronavirus, Nicola Zingaretti positivo al test: "Combatto, niente panico"", 2020) the message completely changed and a country-wide campaign under the hashtag "#iostoacasa" (translatable in English as " I am staying home") has been promoted to explain the importance of observing a quarantine period in order to stop the virus from spreading (Decreto IoRestoaCasa, domande frequenti sulle misure adottate dal Governo, 2020). In these terms, social media did not have a direct impact on the government; although they increased the confusion in the country, they acted as a "megaphone" to influence the population's behaviour. But in certain cases, their use can be perfectly classified under the definition of Tumultuous Technology provided by Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà (2017). In fact, social media have been the perfect instrument to promote a wide array of fake news and at the same time they have been the place for conspiracy theorists to spread a large spectrum of theories, mainly regarding the true origin of the virus, suspected to be created in a Chinese laboratory ("China coronavirus: Misinformation spreads online about origin and scale", 2020). This typology of online posts fall within the definition of Tumultuous Technology provided by Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà (2017), as they "...lend a voice to anyone whose attitudes and beliefs may traditionally have been considered too far outside the mainstream" (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà, 2017). Under the same concept of Tumultuous Technology can be described those posts that have been used by those "antisystem groups" (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà, 2017), in this case some opposition Italian parties, to undermine the stability of the government, taking advantage of a complicated situation such as the current one. In particular, on the 8th of March, the draft of a new decree elaborated by the government, deciding to completely close, in a Wuhan-like measure, the whole region of Lombardy and 14 other provinces, has been leaked and sent to the CNN editorial staff who, publishing it, caused thousands of Italian citizens to leave the so called "red zones" to avoid suffering the restrictions, with the concrete risk of bringing the infections to other parts of the country; although it is still not clear who is the responsible of the event, the official Twitter account

of the major opposition party, the Lega Nord, guided by Matteo Salvini, posted the text of the decree online after the leak, contributing to increase the fear among those who decided to leave the interested areas with the risk of "exporting" the virus in Regions that were still untouched, causing an overwhelming indignation in the country ("Coronavirus, la fuga di notizie sul decreto. Cnn: "Bozza ricevuta dall'ufficio stampa della Regione Lombardia". Che smentisce: "Falso"", 2020). This episode is significatively important to report in the context of Tumultuous Technology as it perfectly shows how "social media have been elevated as powerful tools in the hands of populist candidates and parties precisely because social media allow them to create spectacle rapidly" (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà, 2017). This description of the use of social media in Italy, other than confirming an already known profound difference with the use of social media in China, allows to a reflection under the term of transparency: while the Italian government, through its official channels, maintained the maximum openness possible in providing information about the virus such as data, news and rules, the innate nature of freedom of online social network contributed to reduce the positive effect given by transparency and might be arguably deemed as one of the utmost causes of the initial skyrocketing spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the country: in these terms it is possible to identify a "blurring effect" of technology on transparency.

2.1   Findings and Reflections

The differences emerged between China and Italy through the case study comparison are clear, both from the point of view of the transparency and also in regard to the technology. Highlighting these disparities provided a clear picture of the situation, that confirms O'Malley, Rainford and Thompson's theory (2009) in revealing how transparency is a fundamental element in avoiding and eventually managing an health emergency such the one of a novel and unknown virus break: had the Chinese government not punished the whistle-blower Dr. Li Wenliang and his colleagues, and had the same government not denied important information such as the human to human transmission of the virus in the initial stage of the crisis, the situation would have been completely different by now (Garrett, 2020); this did not happen in Italy, where the government has been as clear as possible on the ongoing situation from the very beginning of the emergency. On the other hand, the effect of social media has been also clearly shown by the comparison: while in China these channels are severely controlled and did not interfere with the management of the pandemic, resulting in accurate and prompt measures, the Italian scenario, instead, tells about a prominent influence of social networks on the citizens' opinions and fears, that resulted in not appropriate and late actions taken by the government, that was eventually even forced to apply a Wuhan-styled quarantine for the whole country. The individuation of this relation between transparency and technology, as it is here presented, does not suggest that restricting and controlling online freedom as it happens in China is the key to solve emergencies such as the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, but rather opens the path for a reflection on how democracies, who are believed to be the best prepared for this kind of emergencies (as sustained, for instance, by Berengaut, 2020 and Ruger, 2015), might actually need to consider this "blurring effect" caused by the social media and prepare some "counterattacks" in the occasion of other future emergencies for what it concerns the communication inside the country. Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that the efficiency of a democracy in managing a health emergency

such as a pandemic of a novel virus, should not (only) be measured in terms of the concrete measures that are implemented to fight the emergency: in fact, as it is demonstrated by the case study comparison, Italy implemented the same desperate measures that China took when locking down the city of Wuhan in order to contain the outbreak, and although it is obtaining the first shy results, it is still struggling in containing the disease, as a result of the "blurring effect" (as depicted in the paragraphs above) of the transparency provided by the government in the initial stages of the pandemic. What must be therefore considered is to which extent the transparency of a democracy can resist to undermining attempts, and learning from this very specific case, until when it can resist to the challenges posed by technology. This preposition can be further confirmed by the fact that also in the authoritarian China, once the government understood the situation and increased the transparency level by recognising the emergency and actually putting at the service its knowledge on the virus not only to its citizens but also to the international community, the containment of the epidemic started to properly work and to give the desired results; clearly, the Chinese government still presents a very low level of openness and the control of the internet and the development of new technologies requested by the Communist Party to supervise the population (Qiang, 2019) is worrying and should be blamed, but in terms of the research question here proposed it explains that if in an authoritarian state the level of transparency from the central government is important in fighting an health emergency, to greater reason the same element is fundamental in a democracy. The difference between China and Italy made in terms of Liberation Technology, Repression Technology and Tumultuous Technology (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà, 2017) is a necessary passage to make because it explains that social media, by having this "trivalent feature", affects the transparency in different ways, that in the end are decisive for the final outcome: if the Liberation Technology allowed whistle-blowers to announce a new disease and the Repression Technology, by silencing those voices, made China losing time in the initial times of the epidemic but conducted the country to a linear and almost complete victory over the virus, the Tumultuous Technology produced the "blurring effect" that is currently not helping Italy in the battle. Of course, the state of the transparency is not the main element concurring to a successful administration of an emergency: some other "empirical" components that it is possible to cite by looking at the SARS-CoV-2 events are for instance the attitude of the population to follow the rules (which has been completely different between Italy and China, maybe because of an underlying "fear" of breaking the rules that is perceptible in China and is not in Italy), and the level of preparedness of a certain country in terms of health policies or in more "material" terms such as the availability of structures like hospitals or the level of medical technology. For this reason, it might be argued that social media and their effects on transparency are not the primary reason for the situation the globe is currently living in, because what it counts in managing an outbreak are merely the policies implemented and the level to which they are respected by the population; but after a deeper reading of the issue, especially in light of theories such the one proposed by O'Malley, Rainford and Thompson (2009), it is easy to understand that a good understanding (especially from policy-makers) of the potential of social media is fundamental in the prevention of catastrophes linked to health emergencies. In conclusion, it is also important to point out that social media are not the only technologies that can influence transparency and therefore the management of a health emergencies. For instance, before reaching the peak of the infections, in Febru-

ary, the Chinese government developed a smartphone application that, by identifying people in the surrounding area using the same application, was able to express the probability of the user to be infected (Thorbecke, 2020); nevertheless, Chinese government is reported to use Artificial Intelligence also for other purposes, for instance by taking advantage of very sophisticated algorithms who are able to recognise faces and other peculiarities of an individual and to implement them in their video-surveillance systems to gather data about the population (Qiang, 2019), being another good example of Repression Technology (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts and Barberà, 2017) in Xi Jinping's state. The reason behind the choice of considering the impact of social media only in this paper is driven by different reasons. Firstly, Italy does not use AI in the same way as China does, to control their citizens (Qiang, 2019), therefore a comparison on other technologies is not meaningful; secondly, analysing social networks allows to show better and to explain the "blurring effect" on transparency that has been elaborated in this paper.

2.2   Conclusions

The SARS-CoV-2 outbreak gives space for theoretical discussions at the intersection of technology, democracy and health. The aim of this paper is to add some reflections on the dominant idea that democracies, because of their transparency, freedom and openness are necessarily better prepared to deal with health emergencies such as a pandemic (Ruger, 2015); in this sense, the comparisons made in this article are meant to show that transparency is actually blurred by the impact of social media and their innate characteristic of freedom, that allows everyone to have their say on a certain topic. This does not mean either that authoritarian states are necessarily better at managing these typology of issues, underlying how the pandemic started because of the "authoritarian blindness" of the Chinese government (Berengaut, 2020), but the comparison between a democratic and an authoritarian system aims to raise awareness on the instruments that democracy has and, therefore, encourages to open further discussions to consider the power of technology for the next future health emergencies. In this regard, the main theoretical proposition that it is possible to formulate as a result of the work elaborated in this paper is that an element that needs to be considered in assessing how responsive a democracy is to a health emergency is the extent to which the transparency of that democracy can resist to undermining attempts, and in particular until when it can resist to the challenges posed by technology. Through the consideration of this theoretical proposition and of the elaborated concept of "blurring effect", it is finally possible to answer to the initial research question by stating that technology, and in particular social media, have an underrated effect on a democracy's transparency and therefore, if the democratic government in question does not consider this factor, can suffer from some serious issues and delays in providing an appropriate response to a global health emergency. As the SARS-CoV-2 territory is still relatively uncharted, applying this answer to every democracy facing this issue might be tricky, because every peculiarity of the questioned democracy should be considered in this context; for this reason, the topic needs and deserves further investigation, especially once the pandemic will be declared as officially solved.

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