

When "Bufala" Whoppers Roam Through the News

Judith Harris (July 09, 2018)



In Italian the word "bufala" means, not mamma buffalo, as in "mozzarella di bufala," but a "whopper" or, in today's jargon, fake news. No less than anywhere else, bufala whoppers are roaming through the news ranges of Italy.

ROME -- In Italian the word "bufala" means not mamma buffalo, as in "mozzarella di bufala" (mozzarella made from water buffalo milk), but "hoax," a whopper or, in up-to-date jargon, fake news. And no less than anywhere else, whoppers are roaming through the news ranges of Italy via semi-anonymous or masqueraded Facebook entries and blogs, from which they travel onward, all too often, as supposedly legitimate news items.

My personal disinformation favorite is a photo that circulated nine years ago showing a man identified as Ako Sharmootah. (Actually, the supposed name translates into "your sister is a bitch.") Ako has a definitely Arabic look, and is therefore a Muslim. In a caption he is denounced because, "He wants to impose upon Italy the use of Arab numerals. Agree if this makes you indignant!!" Eventually the man in the photograph was identified as a political extremist in prison in the UK. Still, the idea caught on, and in an updated version circulated now, a young man in Arab headgear named



Tarim Bu Aziz is described as seeking "greater integration [of foreigners] by having Arab numerals introduced into Italian schools."

But guess what: as most of us recall from school, our decimal number system, which originated in India some 1,300 years ago, was introduced into Europe in the 12th century. Otherwise we would not have algebra and would still be writing MMXIX for 2018. So what was the point of someone making such a claim? First, the author of this "bufala" assumes that his audience of the non-elite do not know the meaning of the words "Arab numerals", and that this insertion, while fostering anti-Muslim sentiment, will generate fear and a desire to protect the children. Before this was removed as a "bufala," it received 9,000 shares.

In another phony whopper with a photo, Italians were told that "230 Italians were kicked out of their neighborhood to make room for migrants." As it happened, the 230 were Italians who were obliged to leave their homes because an earthquake had left the houses unsafe.

Fortunately Italy has a dedicated "bufala" hunter who calls himself maicolengel butac. Michelangelo Coltelli (his real name) is a 45-year-old from Bologna whose family businesses are, on one side, running the 184-year-old jewelry shop [Gioielleria Coltelli](#) [2] and, on the other, medicine. In an exclusive interview Coltelli explained that, in 2013, after the birth of his first child, he was overwhelmed with so-called facts which, from the doctors in the family, he knew to be untrue. This spurred in him a passion to understand what fake news is all about, and a desire to denounce disinformation. And so he did, in a blog that has gained nationwide interest, www.butac.it [3], "Butac" being short for "Bufale un tanto al chilo", which translates to "Whoppers by the kilo." He describes himself as "touchy,skeptical, a rationalist, the devil's advocate."

Among the whoppers he pointed out is a photo, reproduced in La Repubblica daily, of a sailor supposedly aboard the ship the Aquarius, which took migrants to a Spanish port after Italy refused them entry. This "sailor" was "fired because he told the truth," said a caption. Once again, the disinformation theme was essentially anti-migrants. Another whopper Coltelli uncovered shows a photo purporting to be a doll that had been made to resemble a real victim of a child drowned in Libya. The photo, doll included, was intended to look fake, with a set and actors. The point was to show that the many drownings of children off the Libyan coast are untrue. That is, this was fake news purporting to denounce fake news.

Who is behind this? "Paid professionals," says Coltelli, who, for his pains, has received serious threats to his life. Not surprisingly, political parties are among those suspected of paying for what is plainly professional disinformation. An example was a video at Christmas 2016, when "migrants" appear to be destroying a Christmas tree. The video was actually of the theft of a Christmas tree in the Galleria Umberto in Naples in 2013, but falsely identified as placed on a Facebook page by the "Department of Security and Immigration Northern League Bergamo."

Another "bufala", which circulated in Italy just last week, shows a gigantic crowd of people in front of a big opening, as of a ship's hold. The caption: "Here is a port in Libya, with everybody ready to come to Italy." In fact, the crowd was attending a [Pink Floyd concert held July 15, 1989, in Venice](#) [4]. And over a year ago, moving farther from home, the elite of the Italian press including Corriere della Sera published a report, later revealed as false, that President Donald Trump had denounced the Statue of Liberty as "anachronistic, ugly and an invitation to immigrants."

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[1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/fake-news-o-bufale-1152x759jpg>

[2] <http://www.gioielleriacoltelli.com/htm/storia/storia-index.html>

[3] <http://www.butac.it>



[4] <http://www.openculture.com/2017/05/pink-floyd-plays-in-venice-on-a-massive-floating-stage-in-1989.html>