

# Coordinated hateful disinformation on Italian politics and social issues, since 2017

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If readers have additional information they'd like to contribute to this ongoing analysis, they can reach out to fabio.giglietto+smd@uniurb.it.



## Executive Summary

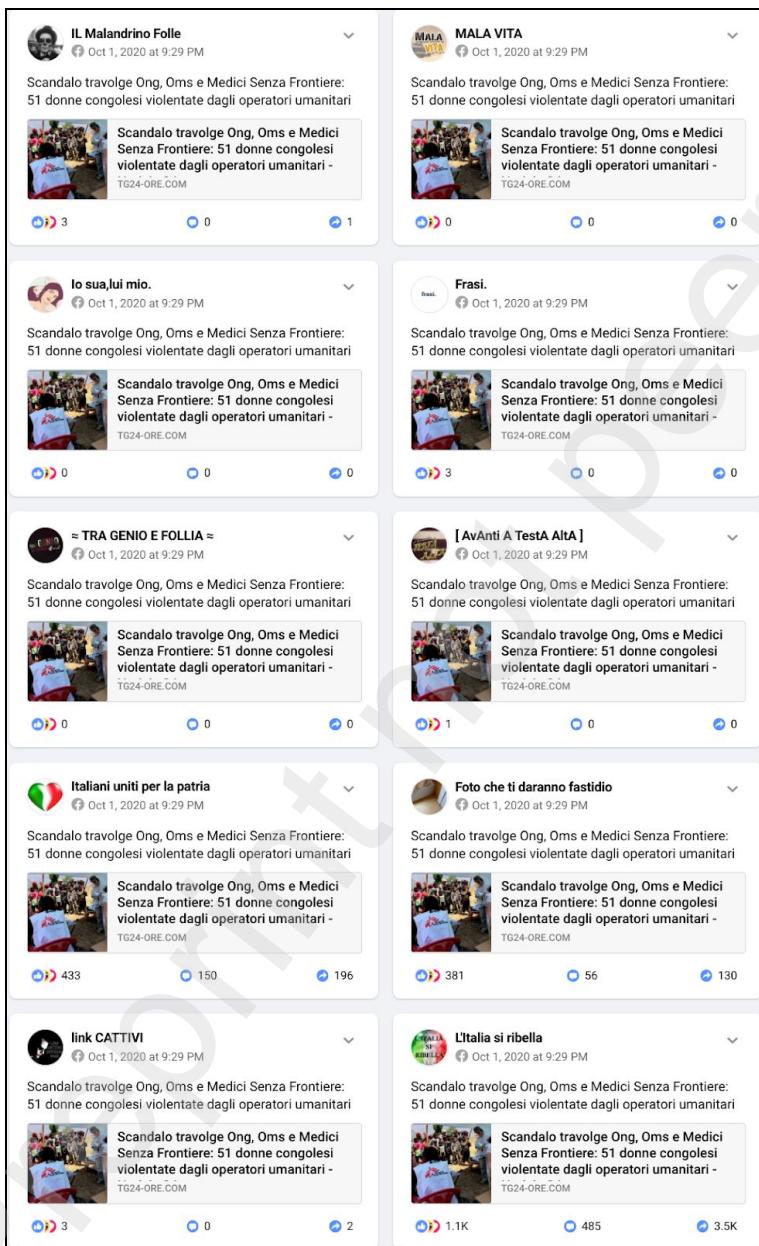
- In the context of a larger study on the spread of Covid-19 related mis/disinformation in Italy, we detected a network of 10 Facebook Pages that performed Coordinated Link Sharing.
- The potential reach of the network is significant, with a cumulative subscriber count close to 2 millions users. Each month, the network publishes more than 6,500 posts.
- The large majority of posts are links (83%), followed by status (8%) and photos (7%). However, 8 over 10 photos also include links in the message/description of the post.
- The current goal of the network is to drive traffic to the tg24-ore.com domain, a news source that, according to NewsGuard, fails to meet all the basic journalistic standards, is anonymous and publishes false news about health and partisan right-wing stories without disclosing their editorial line.
- The network has a long history of activity. It was spotted as performing coordinated link sharing behaviour on highly polarized and false political content in the lead-up to 2018 and 2019 Italian elections (see [elections report](#)).
- The report reconstructs the full list of different domains used by this network from 2017 on and points out to a brand new domain currently used (notiziariodelweb.com).
- Several of the domains shared by this network are featured in fact-checkers black-lists. 35 news stories posted by this network have been rated as false or misleading by Facebook's Italian third-party fact-checker. Despite this, the posts linking to these 35 stories have been cumulatively viewed over six million times and clicked more than five hundred thousand times between 2017 and 2019 on Facebook.
- The domain howtodofor.com was also shared by this network. An analysis of the core Facebook network that shares this domain is available in the [second report](#) of this series.
- The network also serves as a paradigmatic example of how memes page can be repurposed to share highly problematic content as the content posted shifted suddenly from photos to links in the months preceding 2018 Italian general election.
- A diachronic analysis of the networks' coordinated links sharing activities, clearly highlights an escalation of the operation that started immediately after the fall of the "yellow-green" government supported by a coalition of M5S and League. The activity further intensifies from the covid-lockdown on.



## Case description: content, actors, and behavior

### Content

While investigating covid-19 related mis/disinformation in Italy, we came across a network of 10 Facebook pages that consistently shared the same links at approximately the same time (method in Appendix 1). The potential reach of the network is significant, with a cumulative subscriber count close to 2 million users. The largest page has over 500 thousand followers, and the smallest almost 86 thousand (average 199,269). These pages were created between 2010 and 2018 and are managed by administrators based in Italy (see Appendix 2 for additional details).



During the last 12 months<sup>1</sup> overall, pages belonging to this network published an average of 6,738 posts per month (80,900 in total during the whole period).

The large majority of posts are links (83%), followed by status (8%) and photos (7%). The frequencies of remaining types are negligible (590 Facebook native 15 Lives and 15 YouTube videos).

The large majority of photos and status type posts have been used to link external websites either by adding a link in the photo description or using the first comment of the status post. Both strategies have been described in depth by previous reports in [this series](#).

Overall, 93% of the posts created by this network in the observed period included a link. Of these links, the large majority (67%) point to the tg24-ore.com domain. Three other domains have been posted by the network: curiosity-online.com (22%),

<sup>1</sup> 12/01/2019-11/30/2020.

howtodofor.com (8%) and notiziariodelweb.com (2%).

Tg24-ore.com hosts an online web magazine with sections dedicated to politics, crime news, health and curiosities. The domain name is misleading as it can be easily mistaken for SkyTg24 an Italian all news channel owned by Sky Italia. According to NewsGuard<sup>2</sup>, tg24-ore.com fails to meet all the basic journalistic standards, is anonymous and publishes false news about health and partisan right-wing stories without disclosing their editorial line. Overall, the NewsGuard rating of this domain is 0/100.

**tg24-ore.com**

Un sito anonimo che ha pubblicato informazioni mediche false e che sostiene posizioni di destra senza rivelare la propria linea editoriale.

Procedi con cautela: questo sito viola pesantemente standard giornalistici fondamentali.

Fig. 1 - Excerpt from the NewsGuard report about tg24-ore.com

NewsGuard analysis of tg24-ore.com also mentions one of the pages belonging to the network described in this report ("Foto che ti daranno fastidio") and the domain curiosity-online.com described as a website that publishes unsubstantiated news about health. Curiosity-online.com is currently offline. The [most recent snapshot](#) of the site archived by the WayBackMachine is dated December 7, 2019.

Howtodofor.com is an online web magazine with sections dedicated to current affairs, chronicle and TV gossip. According to NewsGuard, howtodofor.com fails to meet several basic journalistic standards and republished articles from other media without mentioning the original source. The [second report](#) in this series describes a large Facebook network dedicated to sharing the news stories published by this web magazine. The report provides in depth information on the actors behind this domain that are thus not described in this report.

Finally, notiziariodelweb.com is a new entry in the portfolio of news outlets featured by this network. The first post with a link pointing to this domain is dated November 11, 2020.

The twelve months of the observed period testify the sudden switch in terms of content providers of posted links. Following a big start in January 2020, the number of posted links pointing to curiosity-online.com constantly decreased until completely disappearing in June 2020. In November 2020 we started observing links to the new domain notiziariodelweb.com. The only constant, although with a varying frequency of post per month rate, is tg24-ore.com (see Fig. 2).

<sup>2</sup> <https://api.newsguardtech.com/label/tg24-ore.com> (available to NewsGuard's subscribers only, last accessed on January 15, 2021).



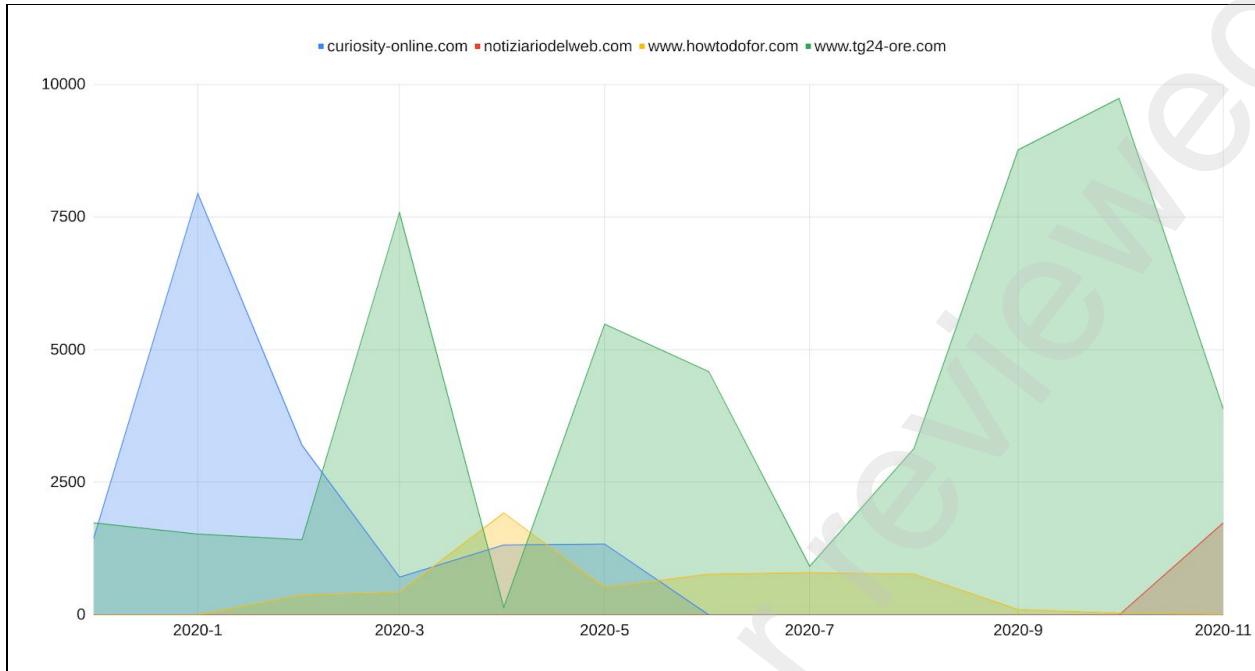


Fig. 2 - Frequency of posts by month linking to different domains (12-2019/11-2020).

To better quantify the amount of traffic received by tg24-ore.com from Facebook, we employed the Condor URLs dataset<sup>3</sup> available in FORT (Facebook Open Research and Transparency) to estimate the number of clicks received by URLs pointing to this domain. During the entire time span currently covered by Condor dataset (January 2017-December 2019), we found 1,745 URLs from tg24-ore.com. Posts containing these links have been cumulative viewed 226 millions times and clicked, thus causing a visit to the website, more than 16 millions times. During the month of December 2019 (the only month where the span of our analysis and the dataset overlaps), we found 11 URLs, 8 millions post's views and 32 thousands clicks.

Given the evidence emerged concerning the way the network periodically switches the domain used, we decided to take a retrospective look at the entire history of this network from 2015 on. This additional analysis reveals the full extent of domain names used.

Domain	Status	Posts with links
<a href="http://www.tg24-ore.com">www.tg24-ore.com</a>	Active	93,690
<a href="http://curiosity-online.com">curiosity-online.com</a>	Offline	17,205
<a href="http://www.tg-news24.com">www.tg-news24.com</a>	Offline	12,188
<a href="http://www.howtodofor.com">www.howtodofor.com</a>	Active	5,707
<a href="http://notiziarioonline360.com">notiziarioonline360.com</a>	Offline	4,094

<sup>3</sup> <https://research.fb.com/data/#facebook-open-research-and-transparency>. Condor data are privacy protected via differential privacy. Reported figures are thus estimates from an interval. See Appendix method for further details.

<a href="http://www.webitalia360.com">www.webitalia360.com</a>	Offline	2,452
<a href="http://www.usoilsarcasmo.com">www.usoilsarcasmo.com</a>	Offline	2,286
<a href="http://notiziariodelweb.com">notiziariodelweb.com</a>	Active	1,735
<a href="http://www.degrado.net">www.degrado.net</a>	Offline	1,260

Tab. 1 - Domains posted by the network at least 1000 times from 2015 to 2020.

While some pages in this network have been created in 2010, the network started overwhelmingly posting links only in March 2017 (Fig. 3).

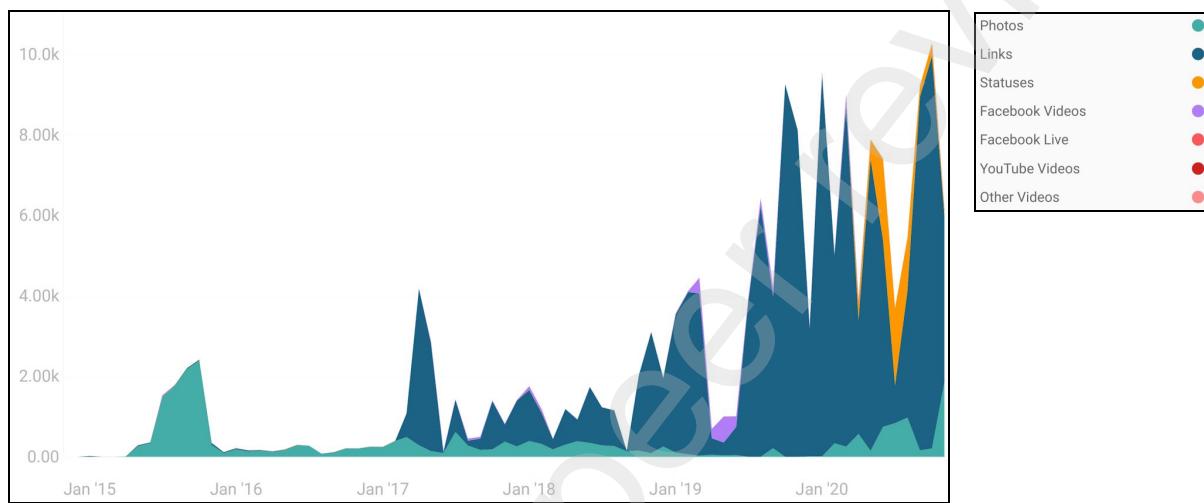


Fig. 3 - Typology of posts created by the network (2015-2020). Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.

Previously, existing pages in the network were used to post image macros and photos. This kind of highly popular content served to build the audience base of the network.

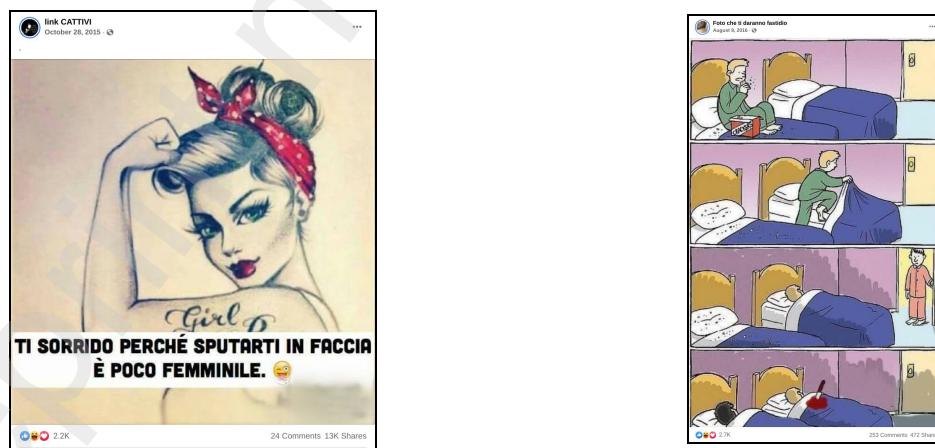


Fig. 4 - Example of posts published before March 2017

From March 2017 on, the pages in the network started focusing on links to external websites.

To give the reader an idea of the main topics covered by the news stories shared by this network, we run a lexical analysis of the message, description and title fields in the dataset of link posts shared from 2017 to 2020 (see Fig. 5). The most frequently covered topic is politics (bottom-left). In the bottom-right corner there is a securitarian topical cluster devoted to news stories covering crime news with a specific attention to crimes allegedly perpetrated by migrants. The cluster situated in the top-right corner includes a set of terms related to families and health issues. This cluster is strictly related with the top-left one which is instead dominated by coronavirus related news stories.

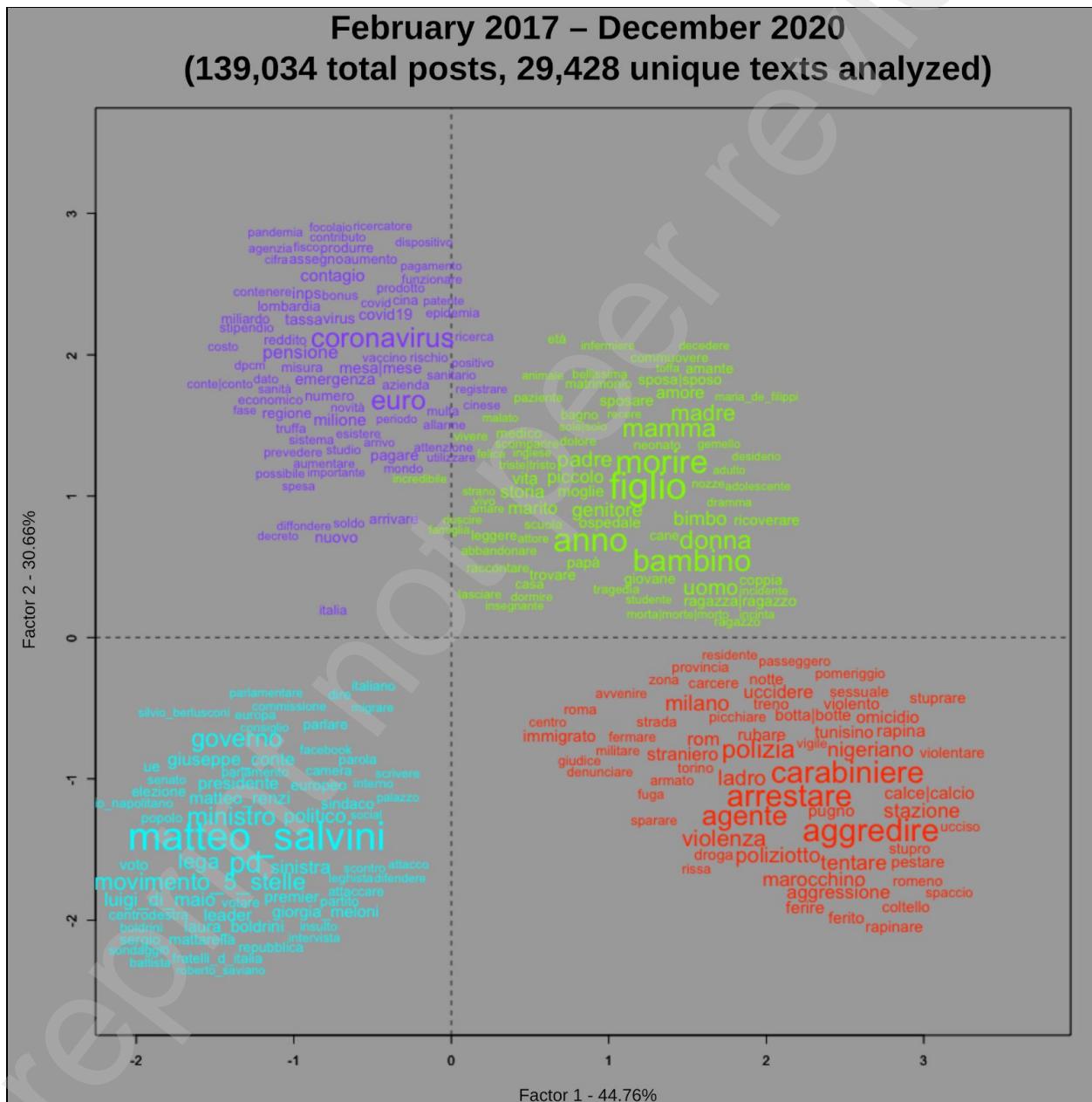


Fig. 5 - Lexical clusters revealing the main topics covered the news stories posted by the network

A closer inspection to stories posted during the Italian covid lockdown, pinpoints a distinction, within the covid cluster, between health news and stories related to containment measures'.

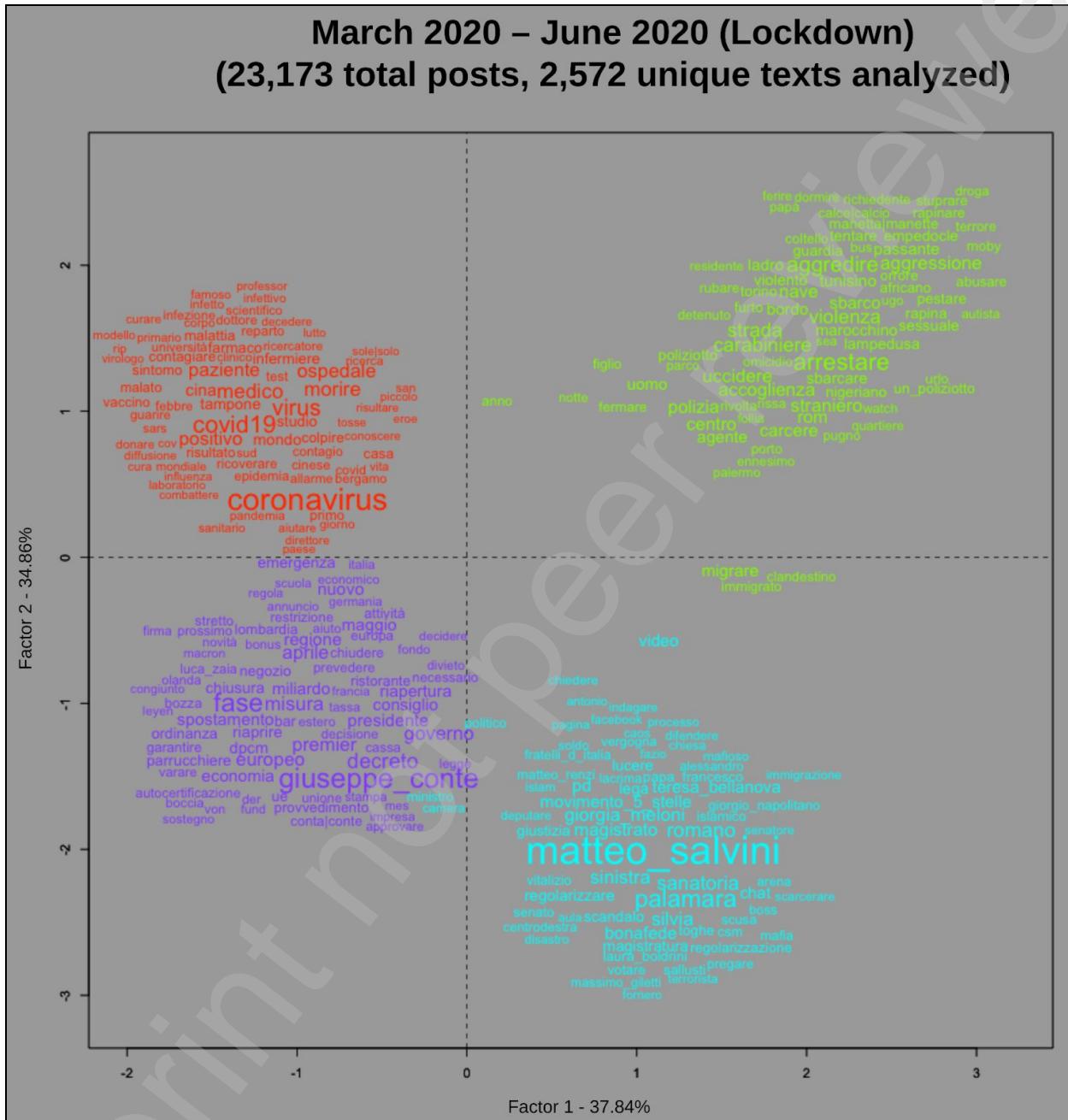


Fig. 6 - Lexical clusters of link posts shared between March and June 2020.

As pointed out by Fig 7, the network periodically changed the domain shared. Most of the abandoned domains have been flagged for false news and/or are listed in fact-checkers black-list.

According to Condor data, 35 news stories from the domains used by this network (1 from notiziarioonline360.com, 18 from tg-news24.com and 17 from tg24-ore.com) have been rated as

"false" (13) or "mixture or false headline" (22) by Facebook Italian third-party-fact-checker (Pagella Politica). Overall the entire dataset lists 177 news stories with these types or ratings for Italy. This network seems thus to have been responsible for a significant share of the false news that caught the attention of the Italian third-party fact-checker.

This set of 35 stories rated as false or misleading was viewed around six million times on Facebook and clicked about 500 thousands times. Stories rated as false (13) gathered more than 2.5 million views and around 200 thousands clicks (see Appendix 1 for details).

A brief analysis of the news stories rated as false (8 from tg-news24.com and 5 from tg24-ore.com), clearly points out that immigration was the main mentioned topic (6), followed by attacks to centre-left-wing politicians (3), praise of Russia/Putin (2), praise of right-wing politicians (1), anti-politics (2), animals related (1). See Fig 8, 9, and 10 for examples of archived content rated as false).

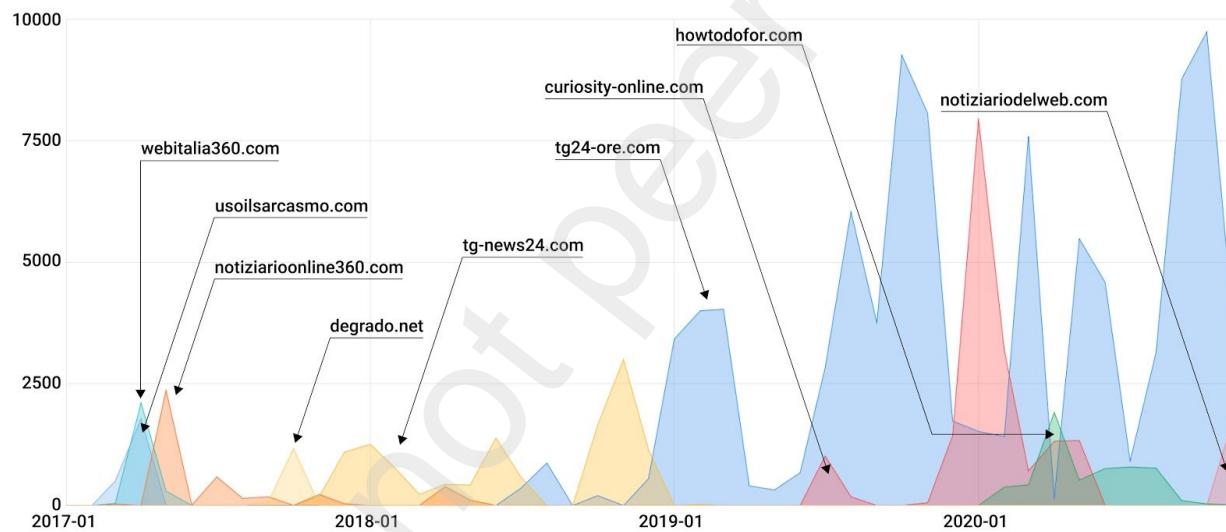


Fig. 7 - Frequency of posts per month linking to different domains (2017-2020).

The screenshot shows a news article from TG-news24. The title of the article is "SCIOLIMENTO DELL'ARMA DEI CARABINIERI LA CAMERA HA COSÌ VOTATO: 442 SÌ TUTTI I PARTITI, NESSUNO ESCLUSO". The article was posted by "ADMIN" on "27 GENNAIO 2018". The page includes a sidebar with links to other articles and a social sharing section.

Fig. 8 - Example of a news rated as false by Facebook's Italian third-party-fact-checker (title: "Dissolution of the Arm of Carabiniers the Chamber voted as follows: 442 yes all parties none excluded", [full article archived by WayBackMachine](#)).

The screenshot shows a news article from TG-news24. The title of the article is "Putin: I politici italiani sono degli incapaci.". The article was posted by "ADMIN" on "15 FEBBRAIO 2018". The page includes a sidebar with links to other articles and a social sharing section.

Fig. 9 - Example of a news rated as false by Facebook's Italian third-party-fact-checker (title: "Putin: Italian politicians are incapable", [full article archived by WayBackMachine](#)).

**Notizie 24 ore** *Su questo sito troverai tutte le news più interessanti del momento.*

POLITICA CRONACA DALL'ITALIA DAL MONDO ECONOMIA E FINANZA SALUTE CURIOSITÀ

CRONACA 0

ARTICOLO SUCCESSIVO  
Cancro, l'addio alla chemioterapia: trovato codice di autodistruzione. Sarà una rivoluzione. >

ARTICOLO PRECEDENTE < Novità INPS: "500 € a chi ha più 55 anni"

Scrivi e premi Invio

1.6k Condivisioni      

**Marocchino palpeggiava ragazza, il fidanzato lo massacra con un raid punitivo**

DI ADMIN · 12 MARZO 2019



CRONACA / DALL'ITALIA  
Il decreto Salvini funziona,

Fig. 10 - Example of a news rated as false by Facebook's Italian third-party-fact-checker (title: Moroccan gropes girl, boyfriend massacres him with a punitive raid", [full article archived by Archive.today](#)).

## Actors

As noted by the NewsGuard report, tg24-ore.com is an anonymous news outlet. The same goes for curiosity-online.com and notiziariodelweb.com. No contacts or editorial board are listed in the website. The privacy policy page is missing. The domains registrant records are redacted for privacy.

Nevertheless, we discovered an old Google Analytics/Adsense code that was used by tg24-ore.com, curiosity-online.com and notiziarioonline360.com. Notiziarioonline360.com is one of the first domains shared by the network (from March 2017 to June 2018) and is currently offline. While the registrant records are obscured, an historical query for past registrants performed via Whoisxmlapi.com reveals two in-clear records (dated May 8, 2018 and December 12, 2017 showing both the domain owner's and the technical contact's information). A reverse search on this data pinpointed a connection between Notiziarioonline360 and "[Fb Autoposter](#)", a discontinued service that promises to "make your posts viral on Facebook" by "publishing in hundreds of groups with one click".

The activity of the vast galaxy of websites connected with Notiziarioonline360 has been scrutinized before by the journalist Nicola Bruno. His work is briefly described in [this article](#) published by the SkyTg24 (the real one) website. The piece embeds videos of a two-part TV talk-show which also features Bruno's work and unveils the list of interconnected websites with respective tracking codes. Besides sharing the same set of tracking codes, this investigative work also points out that the large majority of domain's owners lived in the same small city of [Taurianova](#) in the south of Italy. In [this video excerpt](#) from the aired talk-show, the journalist Manuela Iati interviews Francesco Gangemi, an unemployed carpenter, who claimed to be behind the network. Gangemi, denied any ideological motivation, claiming instead the drivers were purely economical.

Additionally, the month before this investigation aired, the Italian debunker David Puente [investigated](#) the ownership of tg-news24.com domain in March 2018. Puente's analysis shows the connection between tg-news24 and the galaxy of websites analyzed by Nicola Bruno and provides additional evidence pointing to the Taurianova's group.

In its current form, the network is composed of ten pages. Despite the highly polarized and partisan news stories posted, only two over ten pages are authentically branded as ideological driven and nationalist inspired venues. "L'Italia si ribella" ("Italy rebels") is the largest of the two with more than 130 thousands followers. Founded in 2017, during the last part of 2020 the page increased its follower base by 10%. "Italiani uniti per la patria" ("Italians united for the homeland"), founded in 2016, growth by 1% during the observed period. Overall, the interaction rate of both pages are low (around 1% monthly interaction rate). Nevertheless, their best performing posts account for thousands of interactions (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11 - Best performing posts of the two ideologically branded pages in the set (the domain is offline thus the preview is black).

While posting the exact same links at approximately the same time with the aforementioned pages, the remaining eight accounts in the set present themselves as apolitical venues dedicated to fun and entertainment. Their most performing post type is video (the vast majority of content posted are links).

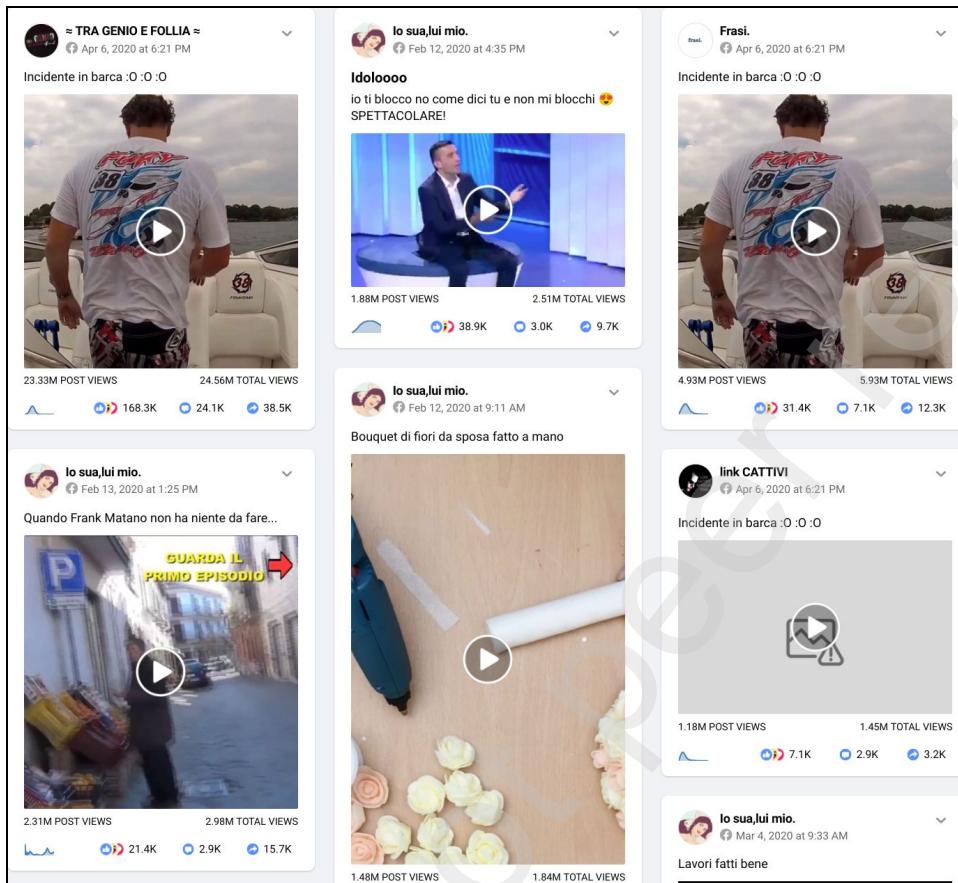


Fig. 12 - Most performing posts. Excerpt from CrowdTangle search.

Despite this handful of super-viral posts, the average monthly interaction rate of these pages is even lower (0.02%) than what observed for the two openly ideological pages.

The page “Link Cattivi” (“Mean Links”), is the only page to disclose its relationship with one of the domains currently used by listing notiziariodelweb.com as a page’s website link.

Starting in February the page “Io sua,lui mio.” (“I his,he mine”) suddenly went from posting an average of 2 posts per day to 25 of the remaining period. Approximately during the same period and with the exception of this page, the entire network went completely silent for three days from February 7 to 9. The same blackout is also observable during two days in September (11 and 12). During the entire month of February, the page “Foto che ti daranno fastidio” (“Photos that will bother you”) posted only 30 posts. 27 of them are dated 1st of February 2020. These types of blackouts are sometimes hints for a temporary Facebook intervention in response to a violation of their community standards.

During the observed 12 months, the network appears to have changed strategy multiple times. This constant swap of tactiques to adapt to a rapidly evolving environment (shifts in platform policy enforcements and algorithms) is probably the main reason behind the longevity of this operation. To better grasp this peculiarity, in the next paragraph we widen our observation angle to include the entire history of the network from 2010 to 2020.

#### Behaviour

To give the reader an overview of the network's activity across its history from January 22 2011 (first data of recorded activity by a page of this network on CrowdTangle) and December 31 2020, we identified five distinct phases.

During its first phase (2011-2016), the existing pages in the network built their audience by publishing highly shareable and popular content in the form of image macros. As pointed out by our previous works, this content tends to perform well on Facebook and it is currently also used by the other two networks we analyzed before, to increase the average engagement and thus maintain an active connection with their followers.

During the second phase (2017), the network started to morph into a news article delivery system. Suddenly, the link type posts become prominent. However, only some of the involved pages started linking news stories as their main content in this phase.

In the third phase (2018), the whole network tends to post an overwhelming amount of links and politics become a prominent topic with the introduction of the domain tg-news24.com.

Once the bad fame of tg-news24.com became a problem, a new twin domain emerged (tg24-ore.com), giving birth to the fourth phase (2019).

In its most recent incarnation (2020), the network attempted to launch, side by side with tg24-ore.com, an additional brand new domain (curiosity-online.com) hosting curiosity driven and gross news stories. This new domain suddenly disappears in the middle of 2020. Nevertheless, the history of the network is not over (and the fantasy of their mastermind not exhausted) as the very last month of 2020 witnesses the introduction of a new additional domain (notiziariodelweb.com) currently used side-by-side with tg24-ore.com.

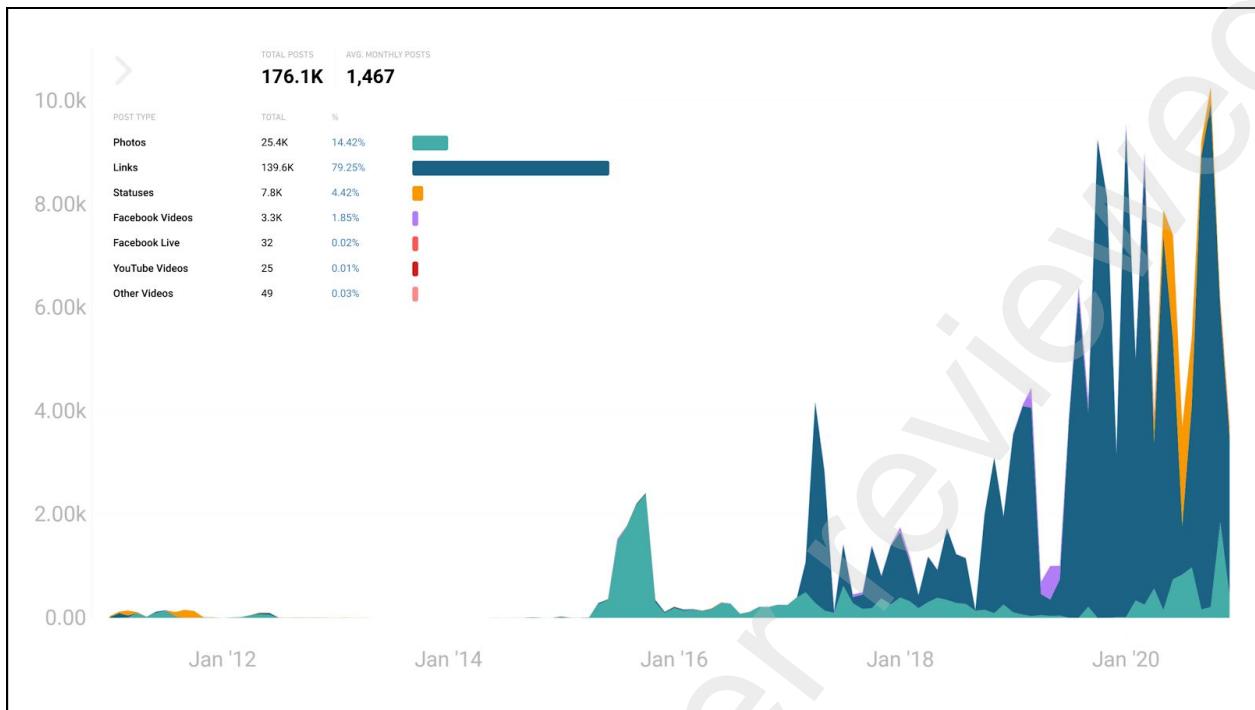


Fig. 13 - Posting rate and type (2011-2020). Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.

A diachronic analysis of the content delivery phase (see Appendix 3), clearly points out that the network often changed strategy in response to major Italian political events. During the month of 2018 election and again during the month of 2019 European election the number of pages actively coordinating to share links peaked. Furthermore, the activity significantly intensified (both in terms of active pages and volume of links shared) following the fall of the populist yellow-green government - see The political “fake news” phase I (2018) paragraph for details. Finally, starting from February 2020 (month of the first Covid-19 outbreak in Italy) on, the whole potential of the network is activated (eight to ten pages active).

This diachronic analysis also documents the rise of the relationship between tg24 and howtodox networks.

#### The meme phase (2010 - 2016)

Figure 14 shows the type of posts that this network shared from 2011 until 2017. In this phase, most of the posts shared are photos (90,29%). The volume of posts published is relatively low, except for a peak between June and November 2015 shared by the Facebook page “MALA VITA” (Racket). In these six months, MALA VITA shared over 6,700 posts, mostly photos. The page seems to aim at reaching a feminine audience, in fact, it published images of women or couples matched with emotional or motivational sentences (Fig. 15).

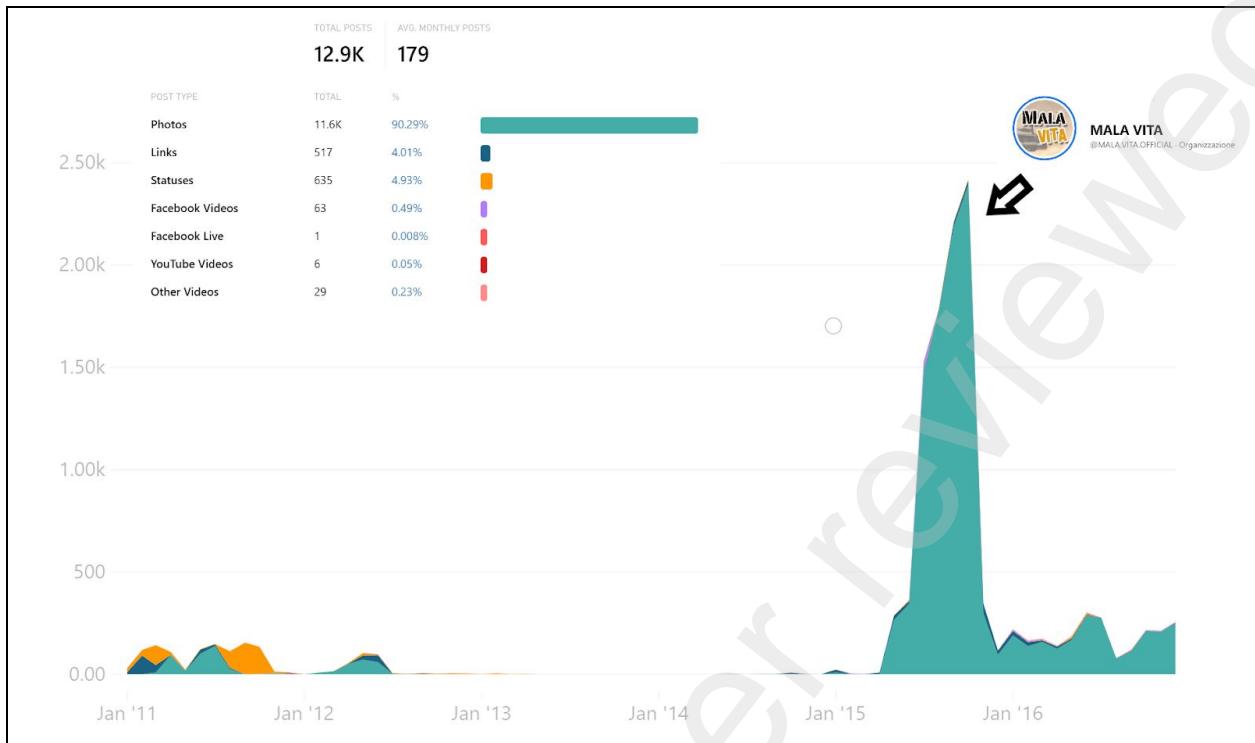


Figure 14 - Frequency of post per type. Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.



Fig. 15 - Examples of MALA VITA posts during its 2015 peak of posting. [1] left side: "I saw true love meet. Ignore. And pretend not to be missed.>"; [2] right side: "Don't pull the string too hard (push one's luck), it breaks. I have a good heart but if I say enough I will eliminate you from my life."

In general, as observed in the [second report](#) of this series, this network used to share essentially memes and hilarious photos or aphorisms about love and life, such as those in figure 16 published respectively by “Foto che ti daranno fastidio” (Pictures that bother you) and “Io sua, lui mio” (Me hers, him mine). As mentioned previously in this chapter, this kind of content suitable to become viral attracts over time a potentially large and relatively active audience base.



Fig. 16 - Examples of posts published by the network since 2017. The first is a joke saying “feeling helpless in front of the closed pistachio”, while the second on the right side is a sort of love phrase “and anyway we'll have to meet again. You and I have a kiss pending”.

#### The shapeshifting phase (2017)

The year 2017 seems to still be a phase of audience building, in which most of the Facebook pages of the network share photo type posts. Initially, just the page “link CATTIVI” seems to have posted a significant number of links, followed by “Italiani uniti per la patria” and “L’Italia si ribella”. This page, mostly inactive until 2016, shows a peak of link sharing between March and May 2017 (see Fig. 18). Most of the URLs shared points to the usoilsarcasmo.com domain that, despite its name that means “I use sarcasm”, shares divisive news on different issues such as antiscientific claims about natural remedies, alternative cures, click-bait crime news, sex scandals, and sometimes anti-immigrants narratives (Fig. 17). Frequently, the same link is shared multiple times in subsequent posts.

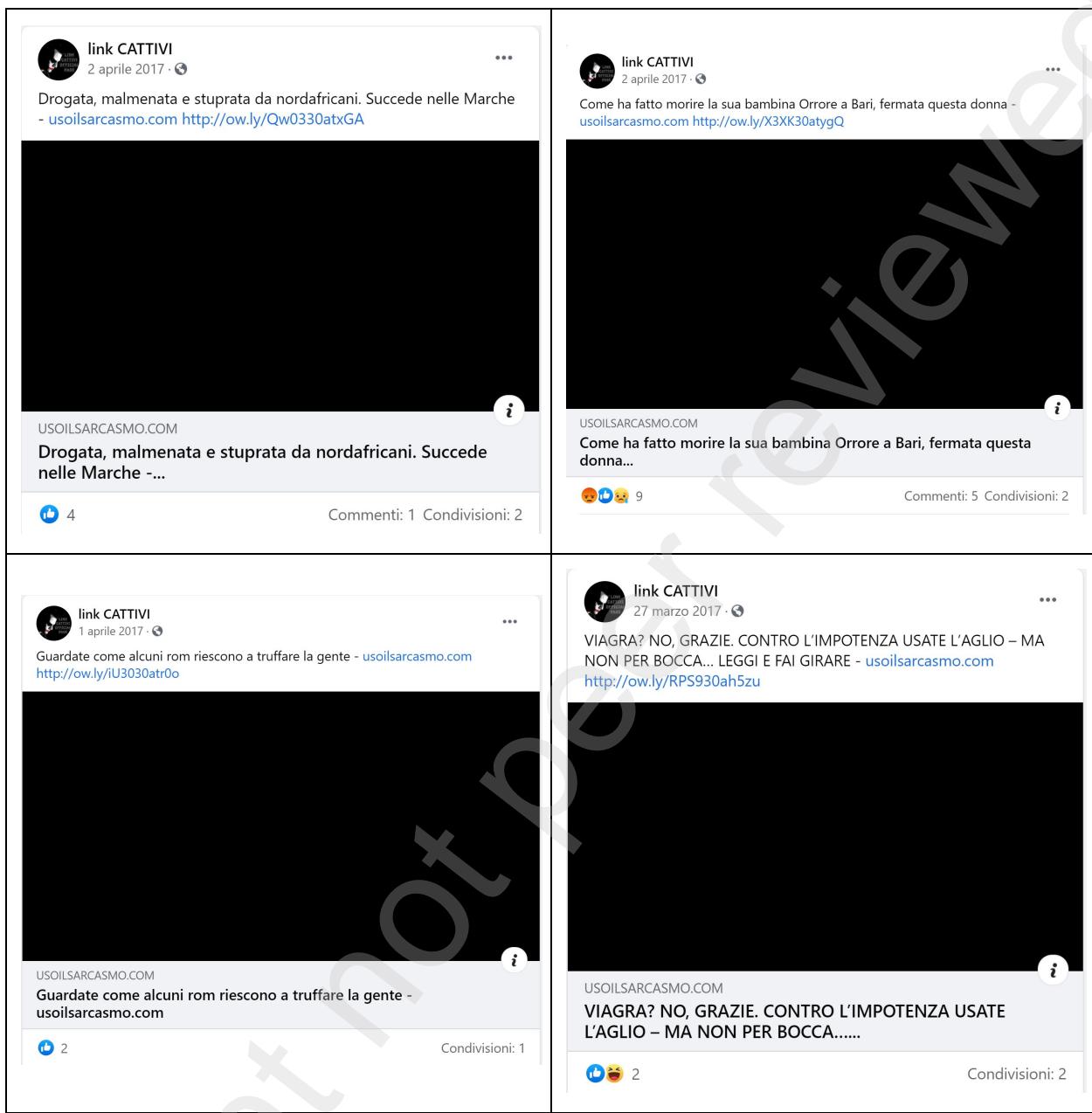


Fig. 17 - Examples of link CATTIVI sharing usoilsarcasmo.com news. [1] top-left side: "Drugged, beaten and raped by three North Africans"; [2] top-right side: "How did her little girl die. Horror in Bari, stop this woman..."; [3] down-left side: "See how some gypsies manage to scam people"; [4] down-right side: "Viagra? No thanks. Against impotence use garlic".

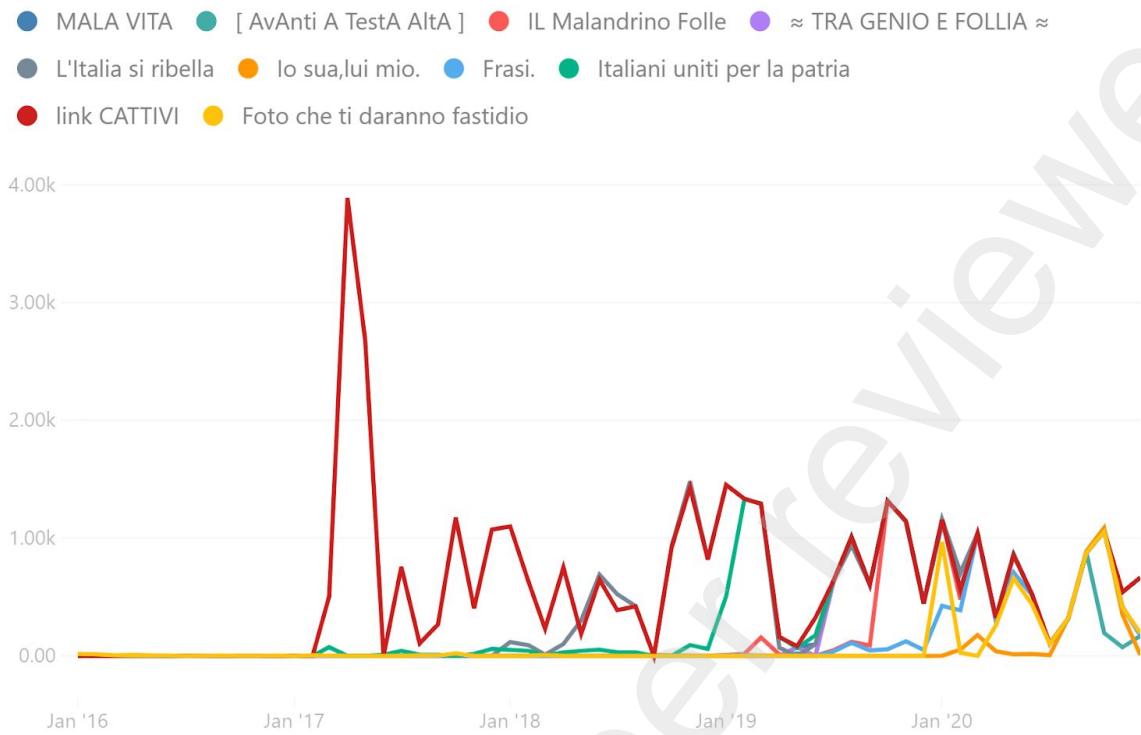


Fig. 18 - Number of link type posts per Facebook pages (01/01/2016 - 12/31/2020). Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.

## The political “fake news” phase I (2018)

During the year 2018, the entire network was active but with “Link cattivi” and “L’Italia si ribella” accounted for almost half of the posts of the entire networks. The link type posts overwhelmingly prevail on other kinds of content. With the launch of tg-news24 and its hyper-partisan political news stories, 2018 marks the beginning of the political “fake news” phase. However, in this phase only the two aforementioned pages work in coordination by posting their links at approximately the same time.

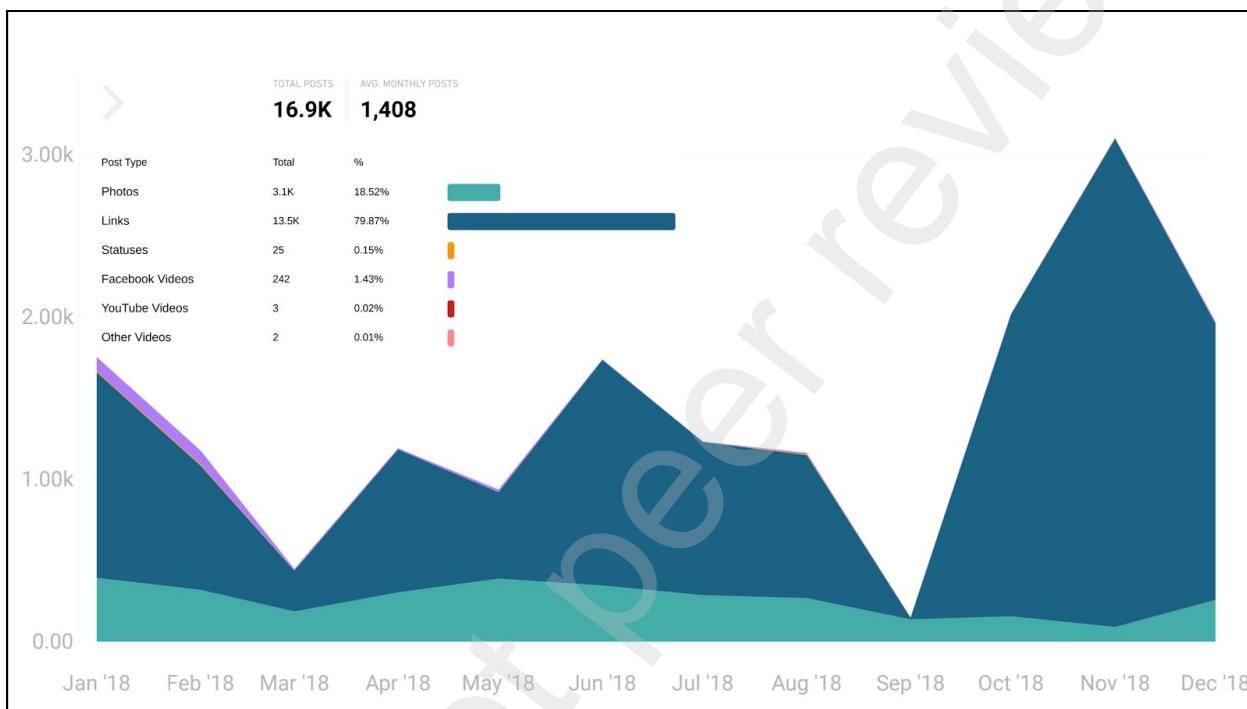


Fig. 19 - Monthly posting rate and post type. Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.

On March 4 2018, Italy held its general election. After months of political uncertainties, in May 2018 a new government was formed supported by a coalition of two different populist parties (League and Five Stars Movement).

May and June 2020 were also the two most successful months of the year in terms of engagement for posts created by this network. Despite the overwhelming prevalence of link type posts, the most engaging posts were politically charged and nationalists image macros. Three of these top posts praise the newly elected government (Fig 20).



Fig. 20 - Most successful posts of the year. Excerpt from CrowdTangle search.

During the months before March elections, the links to tg-news24 were also posted, at the same time, by the page "[Affare Fatto](#)" (Fig. 21).

WHO SHARED THIS LINK?	MESSAGE	DATE	INTERACTIONS
 <b>L'Italia si ribella</b>	ROM NON PAGANO, PUTIN LI FA MANGANELLA – VIDEO	JAN 27, 2018	<b>750</b>
 <b>Affare Fatto</b> 132,260 Page Likes	ROM NON PAGANO, PUTIN LI FA MANGANELLA – VIDEO	JAN 27, 2018	<b>414</b>
 <b>link CATTIVI</b> 208,863 Page Likes	ROM NON PAGANO, PUTIN LI FA MANGANELLA – VIDEO	JAN 27, 2018	<b>88</b>

Fig. 21 - An example of a post coordinately shared by an additional page not included in this network. Excerpt from CrowdTangle link search.

The political “fake news” phase II (2019)

2019 was crucial for this network due to two distinct events: the European elections in May and the crisis of the populist “Yellow-green” government (supported by a Five Stars Movement and League coalition) and the consequent formation of a new government alliance between Five Stars Movement and Democratic Party. This abundance of political events shaped the network editorial strategy as well as its significant increase in activity.

The volume of posts significantly increased over the course of the last 4 years (see Fig. 13). In 2016 the entire network published 2,345 posts, 20 per month on average, while in 2017 the number of posts shared noticeably increased to 14,961, with an average of 125 posts per month. This growth is not even comparable to 2019 one, when the number of shared posts raised to about 50,000. This number is even more surprising, given the two black outs, most probably caused by some Facebook temporary ban occurred in May and September 2019 (see Fig. 22). More specifically, “Italiani uniti per la patria” didn’t post from the 10th of May to 7th of June. “Link CATTIVI” was inactive from the 20th of May to the 5th of June. While L’Italia si ribella experimented a longer-lasting inactive period, from the second of April to the 24th of June. The three of them didn’t post any content also between the first and the 15th of September (fig. 22).

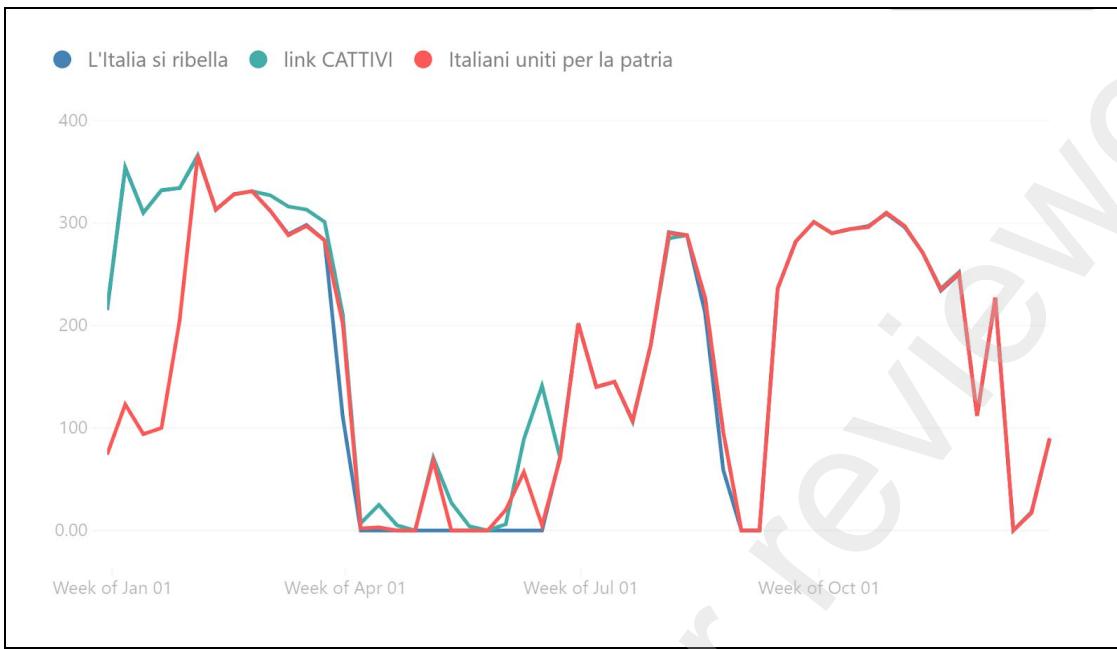


Fig. 22 - L’Italia si ribella, Link CATTIVI, and Italiani uniti per la patria posting trend. Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.

2019 is splitted in different sub-phases that roughly correspond to the main political events mentioned above. [1] During the first trimester, link CATTIVI, L’Italia si ribella and Italiani uniti per la patria, explicitly political pages, regularly share [www.tg24-ore.com](http://www.tg24-ore.com) news as well as, even if less frequently, IL Malandrino Folle (starting by the 25th of February). [2] In the aftermath of the European elections, other more ambiguous pages, [ AvAnti A TestA AltA ], MALA VITA, and ≈ TRA GENIO E FOLLIA ≈, joined the group by coordinateately sharing the same news stories. [3] Lastly, Frasi joined for the first time - although not on a regular basis - the [www.tg24-ore.com](http://www.tg24-ore.com) coordination network in July (see fig. 21).

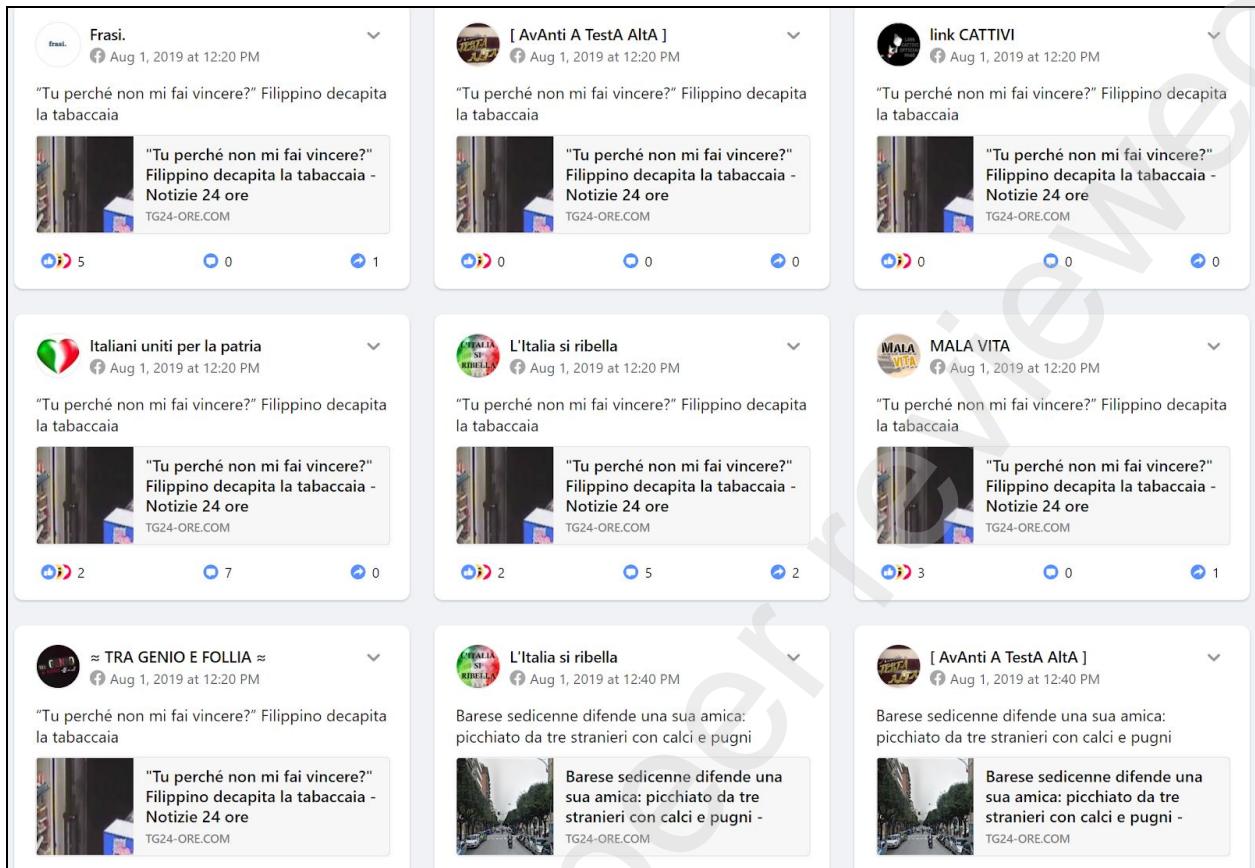


Fig. 23 - Example of coordinated share. Excerpt from CrowdTangle search.

Taking into account news stories published, a few of those are conceived to be incredibly spreadable in order to increase the visibility of the network, such as the news in the following figure (Fig. 24) about a disappeared boy. This story reached 1,358,890 interactions and was shared by L’Italia si ribella, link CATTIVI, Italiani uniti per la patria, [ AvAnti A TestA AltA ], MALA VITA, and ≈ TRA GENIO E FOLLIA ≈. Despite the boy being found a few days later, this news was curiously reposted in 2020 by Inedito.net, as reported by [Facta](#).



Fig. 24 - "Marco is just 15 years old, he disappeared more than 4 days ago. His sister: share this plea, thanks to who will help me"

Despite there being cases of harmless and legitimate news stories, the majority of tg24-ore news shared by this network is pro League and Brothers of Italy propaganda. While we observed some recurrent issues, such as anti immigration and anti democratic party stories and anti scientific rhetoric, during the year the target to strike moved on to the League government ally.

The curiosity driven fake news" phase (2020)

During 2020, the network further increases the volume of shared posts ( $N= 81,281$ ). Unlike past years, the number of published posts seems to be more equally distributed among the network pages (Fig. 25).

- MALA VITA ● [ AvAnti A TestA AltA ] ● IL Malandrino Folle ● ≈ TRA GENIO E FOLLIA ≈
- L'Italia si ribella ● Io sua,lui mio. ● Frasi. ● Italiani uniti per la patria
- link CATTIVI ● Foto che ti daranno fastidio



Fig. 25 - Pages' monthly post-rate. Excerpt from CrowdTangle report.

During the first days of the year the majority of the network pages still share [www.tg24-ore.com](http://www.tg24-ore.com) links. Starting from the 6th of January, this domain is replaced with [www.curiosity-online.com](http://www.curiosity-online.com). Despite its name, [curiosity-online](http://www.curiosity-online.com) published also anti-immigrants and pro far-right propaganda. In February and the following months of the year, the domain [howtodofor.com](http://howtodofor.com) (that we deepened in the [second report](#) of this series) is shared alternating with the previous ones.

By the 7th of January, the page "Foto che ti daranno fastidio" (that has never published links before) started to share [www.curiosity-online.com](http://www.curiosity-online.com) news. Lastly, while during these years "Io sua, lui mio" has continued to share tabloid news and love aphorisms, in August 2020, this page started to share [tg24-ore.com](http://tg24-ore.com) hyperpartisan news stories.

## Conclusions

Following the [first](#) and [second](#) report in this series that exposed respectively the Billoccino.com (now partially dismantled with only 23 pages left) and Howtodofor.com Facebook network, in this work we describe a set of 10 pages that links the tg24-ore.com domain.

Unlike previously analyzed pages, the content shared by this network is eminently political and most of the domains from 2017 on were listed in multiple fact-checkers black lists. Together with its long documented history, the fact that the activity of this network is well-known makes the case particularly concerning.

Even by focusing only on the Italian case, the ecosystem of actors attempting to exploit Facebook for their own gain is large (certainly larger than the network exposed here) and in constant flux. We expect to unveil other networks soon, but we invite platform's security experts, Italian journalists and researchers in the audience to pay attention to the strategies highlighted in this report and carry on their own investigations.

As a team of academic researchers working in the field of mis/disinformation, especially in the time of a pandemic, we feel a civic responsibility to reach stakeholders, practitioners and the general public with this type of open access reports that points out actors and strategies. At the same time, we are well aware that this kind of outreach only partially fits the scope of our job as academic researchers and drains energy and resources from the more classic routine of peer reviewed academic publishing.

That's why we hope that someone in the audience will pick where we left and feel in the blank. We intentionally left the question of attribution open but we provided all the needed details to address the issue of who is behind this network.

This series of reports is thus a call for a broader collaboration among academic researchers, investigative journalists, fact-checkers and platforms' security experts.

## Appendix 1: Methodology

The data was collected by using CrowdTangle, a Facebook owned social media analytic platform, and the analysis performed with CooRnet (Giglietto, Righetti, & Rossi, 2020), an R package that taps in CrowdTangle data to detect coordinated link sharing behaviour (CLSB). CLSB consists in the sharing of the same links within a short period of time by networks of pages or groups on a social media platform. This strategy is aimed at increasing the reach of the content. Previous research has found that it is regularly associated with the spread of problematic information on Facebook, proving that the method is capable to detect accounts involved in the spreading of problematic information online (Giglietto, Righetti, & Marino, 2019; Giglietto, Righetti, Rossi & Marino, 2020a, 2020b).

In this report, we employ the A-B-C framework (François, 2019) integrated approach that takes into account three different vectors of deception: manipulative Actors, deceptive Behaviour, and harmful. Additionally, we bring this framework a step forward in the direction of what we call the A-B-C cycle. An A-B-C cycle starts from harmful content and detects deceptive behaviour to identify manipulative actors. Once a list of such actors has been identified, the next cycle uses the content produced by these actors to initiate a new iteration of deceptive behaviour detection that, in turn, leads to identifying an updated set of manipulative actors.

The tg24-ore.com network was identified in the context of a larger study dedicated to the circulation of Italian false and misleading news stories about Covid-19 on Facebook. This larger study is based on the database of false and misleading news created and maintained by the IFCN (The International Fact-Checking Network) involved in the Coronavirus Alliance aimed at combating Covid-19-related fake news<sup>4</sup>, which also includes the Italian fact-checking organizations Pagella Politica/Facta and Open. By using CooRnet and CrowdTangle, the false news identified by these organizations were searched on Facebook, with the aim to identify the main Facebook networks involved in their spreading online, enabling us to identify also the Howtodofor.com network this report has focused on.

For this report we also employed FacePager to download Facebook comments from a subset of posts with the aim of exploring the logic behind the strategy of posting the link in the first comment of posts.

Additionally, we estimated the number of views and clicks obtained by howtodofor.com domain on Facebook by means of Condor dataset available in FORT (Facebook Open Research and Transparency). Condor data are privacy protected with differential privacy. Given the distinct amount of noise added to the views and click field plus the relationship between the effect of noise and the amount of data analyzed, the reported data has to be intended as an estimate from a corresponding interval (see Tab. 1 and 2).

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/>



n. URLs	Type	Estimated value	Interval
1,745	Views	226,031,381	+/- 2,826,026
1,745	Clicks	16,505,162	+/- 50,737

Tab. 1 - Circulation of the tg24-ore.com links on Facebook (January 2017 to December 2019).

n. URLs	Type	Estimated value	Interval
11	Views	839,952	+/- 69,322
11	Clicks	31,380	+/- 1,245

Tab. 2 - Circulation of the tg24-ore.com links on Facebook (December 2019).

n. URLs	Type	Estimated value	Interval
35	Views	6,823,741	+/- 480,277
35	Clicks	506,983	+/- 8,623

Tab. 3 - Circulation of the stories published by domains associated with this network and rated as false or misleading on Facebook (January 2017 to December 2019).

n. URLs	Type	Estimated value	Interval
13	Views	2,679,764	+/- 295,467
13	Clicks	207,177	+/- 5,305

Tab. 4 - Circulation of the stories published by domains associated with this network and rated as false (January 2017 to December 2019).

## References

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Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., & Marino, G. (2019). Understanding Coordinated and Inauthentic Link Sharing Behavior on Facebook in the Run-up of 2018 General Election and 2019 European Election in Italy.

Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., & Rossi, L. (2020). CooRnet. Detect coordinated link sharing behavior on social media.

Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020a). It takes a village to manipulate the media: coordinated link sharing behavior during 2018 and 2019 Italian elections. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-25.

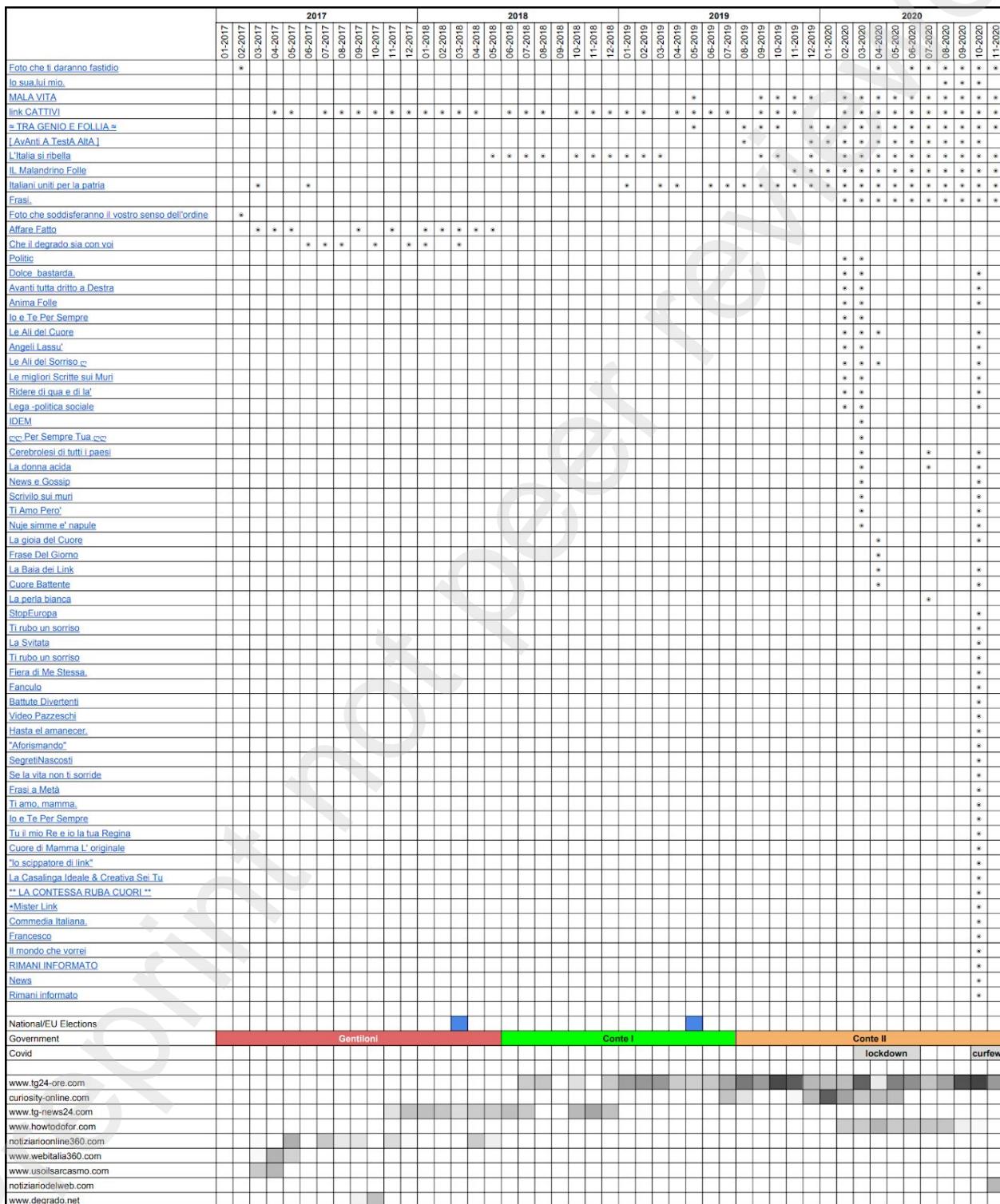
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## Appendix 2: Pages in the network

Page Name/URL	Page Likes	Page creation date
<a href="#">Foto che ti daranno fastidio</a>	520,373	2014-05-10
<a href="#">Io sua,lui mio.</a>	269,995	2015-04-26
<a href="#">MALA VITA</a>	219,676	2010-12-22
<a href="#">link CATTIVI</a>	218,807	2011-04-20
<a href="#">≈ TRA GENIO E FOLLIA ≈</a>	187,092	2011-06-03
<a href="#">[ AvAnti A TestA AltA ]</a>	151,044	2010-10-09
<a href="#">L'Italia si ribella</a>	132,320	2017-01-30
<a href="#">IL Malandrino Folle</a>	103,902	2018-08-03
<a href="#">Italiani uniti per la patria</a>	96,318	2016-04-28
<a href="#">Frasi.</a>	85,240	2016-09-11

## Appendix 3: Timeline chart of coordinated activity, domains used and main historical events



[click to download a larger with active page links](#)



## Legend

Coordinated Link Sharing	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Max volume of links per month	
Min volume of links per month	