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Sharing

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Abstract

This paper addresses the status of the act of sharing a message in a social network. Scholars do not agree on what kind of act sharing is and what kind of communicative and illocutionary act is performed when a post is shared. We defend the view that sharing is an act similar to photocopying and distributing a document. Such an act is a basic act that can be used for communicative aims in certain contexts but that is not necessarily communicative. One can repost for several reasons—to manifest agreement or derision, to inform, to please the author, to show activity on social networks, to have an economic return—and only some of them are communicative. However, even when reposters do not perform a communicative act, they are not relieved of every responsibility; in fact, the responsibilities of reposters are like those of the persons who copy and distribute something.

KEYWORDS
copying, quoting, reported speech, sharing on social media, speech acts

The sharing and retweeting of content through social networks are actions that have played an increasingly important role in contemporary societies. For instance, as (Pepp et al., 2019) state, what seems to distinguish fake news from false news broadcasted by traditional media (newspapers, radio, and television) is that fake news is spread via the sharing functions of social networks. The sharing of messages has assumed central importance in the contemporary fluxes of misinformation.

Given this centrality, interesting debates have recently arisen on the status of sharing (What kind of action is sharing? What kind of communicative act is it? What kind of illocutionary act is it?) and the responsibilities of reposters (Do the reposters who share fake news have the same responsibility as those who produce them? Should we prosecute the reposters who share offensive content in the same way as those who produce that content?). In this paper, we will advance an interpretation of the sharing act, according to which sharing is a basic act similar to the act of photocopying and distributing a document. The act of photocopying and distributing is not necessarily communicative. It can be used for communicative aims in certain contexts, but in other contexts, it can have different aims.

This does not imply that reposters are relieved of every responsibility. In fact, we show that the responsibilities of reposters are similar to those of persons who copy and distribute something.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 1, we define the object of study. In Sections 2 and 3, two interpretations of reposting are analysed (reposting as quoting and as pointing). In Section 4, we build on the view of Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken, according to whom retweeting is a basic act that can be performed with several different illocutionary aims. While we believe that sharing is a basic act, we do not believe that it is necessarily a communicative act or a speech act. In Section 5, some objections to our theory are answered. In Section 6, we address the responsibility of reposters in light of the theory put forward in the previous sections. Section 7 concludes the paper.

1 | REPOST

The debate about sharing has focused particularly on Twitter and re-tweeting (Marsili, 2021; Pepp et al., forthcoming). However, we do not see any reason to restrict our analysis to this social network. Although the sharing function of Facebook has slight differences compared with Twitter, the two functions are sufficiently alike to be analysed together. TikTok also has an analogous function. Therefore, our analysis will be sufficiently general to cover the sharing functions of the main social networks.

Even though many social networks permit adding comments and/or reactions to one's sharing, this action is not mandatory; thus, we will only take into account sharing without any added comment or reaction.

2 | SHARING AS QUOTING

One might think that sharing is a form of quoting. Nonetheless, it has been observed that there are some fundamental differences between sharing and quoting (Arielli, 2018; Marsili, 2021; Pepp et al., forthcoming). Quoting is an assertive act and has truth conditions: if Anne says that Paul has said that *p*, then Anne states that Paul has said that *p* and what Anne says is true iff Paul has said that *p*, false otherwise. There are at least two reasons why sharing differs from quoting. First, it is possible to share not only texts but also photos and videos. In quoting, a propositional content is reported, and it is not possible to quote photos and videos.[1]

Second, it is not possible to give truth conditions to sharing. The truth conditions of quoting concern the more or less marked similarity between what is reported and the original speech. When Anne reports Paul's words, she says the truth if what she says is sufficiently[2] similar to Paul's original speech. Furthermore, Anne must attribute these words to the actual original speaker (therefore, to Paul and not to Luke, for instance).

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[1]We can *describe* one's gestures or even imitate one's gestures to show them to our interlocutor, but this is something different from reported *speech* or quoting.

[2]Obviously, one may wonder *how* similar a reported speech must be to the original one in order to be considered a faithful report. This is evidently a complex issue, but we can ignore it here because, whatever the solution, sharing is different from quoting.

Sharing in social networks is so structured that it is *impossible* for the user to modify even a single word or the content of the original post or to ascribe it to a user other than the original one. Faithfulness to the original content is implemented in and guaranteed by the system. Hence, the reposter cannot lie or be wrong about the content and attribution of the post. The repost is necessarily a copy *identical* to the original post. As Marsili (2021) states, "since a retweet cannot be true or false depending on the correctness of this attribution, there seems to be no ground to contend that such attribution determines the literal truth-conditional meaning of a retweet" (p. 10472). This leads to a further consequence: since reposts are necessarily copies identical to the originals, they cannot be interpreted as *assertions*. An assertion can be true or false, depending on how things are in the world. We have seen that reported speech is no exception in this sense. However, a repost cannot be true or false. The original post can obviously be true or false if it is an assertion. But a repost cannot; thus, a repost cannot be treated as an assertion. For this reason, although some similarities exist between quoting and reposting, we can conclude that reposting cannot be considered a form of quoting.

3 | SHARING AS INDICATING

3.1 | Theory

(Pepp et al., 2019) and Marsili (2021) suggest a different view: sharing is a particular form of indicating or pointing. Pointing is a gesture made by a subject with the intention of directing one's attention toward an object. Obviously, this gesture can be made as a means for a further aim: we can indicate an object because it is interesting or disgusting or because we approve or disapprove of it. The manifestation of these attitudes can be the ultimate goal we pursue when pointing. However, these intentions go beyond that of pure pointing: we can manifest them by pointing, but they are not intrinsic to pointing.

The basic idea is that sharing is a form of pointing toward the original post: "Sharing in social media is an easy, readily available way to make content available to one's network while simultaneously indicating that it is you who has made it available to them" (Pepp et al., 2019, p. 83). However, the object being pointed to is not a physical object, but it is a post, and for this reason, Marsili (2021) compares sharing with indicating a billboard: "Retweeting is an act similar to my pointing at the billboard: it is an act of indication that takes a representation as content" (p. 10471). As in the case of pointing, sharing can be done for different aims: a person can repost a message because s/he agrees with it or because s/he wants to mock it. For instance, Marsili (2021) cites the case of a post written by Trump that contained a sequence of characters (*covfefe*) having no meaning in English (presumably, Trump meant to write *conference*), which was reposted 120,000 times. Most of those who reposted Trump's post arguably did so to express bafflement and hilarity toward the original post. Therefore, the ultimate goals of reposts can be diverse. To be sure, the default assumption in normal circumstances is that the person who reposts a statement or a number of statements manifests agreement with the original content. However, several contextual factors can contribute to cancelling this presupposition: the content of the original message, the identity of the reposter, the circumstances of the reposting, and the public that will likely see the repost are all factors that can help determine the intent of the reposter. In any case, these are aims that go beyond the act of reposting, as they go beyond the act of pointing.

The theory of sharing as pointing is recommendable on different grounds. On the internet, there is an enormous quantity of information and communications. Users always have to filter them to focus on what interests them. Sharing a message is a way by which users' contacts point out that that very message deserves attention. It is as if a certain content were highlighted among the several messages circulating on the internet. The reasons why the content of the message can be interesting are different and one of the merits of this theory is to stress this point.

3.2 | Problems with the theory

Although the theory of reposting as indicating or pointing is reasonable, it has some drawbacks. First, in sharing a message, a copy of the original message is created. This is an important difference with respect to pointing. If we point to an object, we point to that object and not to its copy. By contrast, in sharing a message, a copy of the message appears in the reposter's contacts' feeds. For this reason, Marsili (2021) claims that sharing is halfway between pointing and quoting:

> [...] indicating does not produce new tokens of the indicated content, retweeting does: once retweeted, the original tweet appears on the profiles of both the OP [Original Poster] and the retweeter. The retweet opens up a "digital window" onto the tweet which is itself a new representation of the tweet, in a sense in which my finger pointing at the billboard is not a new representation of the billboard. In other words, retweeting retains an important feature in common with quoting and not with indicating, namely the fact that it does create a new occurrence of the ostended content, by representing it (p. 10471).

This is an important difference between pointing and sharing. The production of a new instance of the original message makes sharing more like quoting and breaks the analogy of pointing–indicating.

Second, one may wonder whether this view is truly able to distinguish itself from the quoting view. Several scholars have interpreted quoting as a meta-representation (Recanati, 2000; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wilson, 2012). It is a representation that represents another representation. By making the meta-representation manifest to their interlocutors, the speakers also make the representation manifest. In other words, if a person reports Anne's words, s/he informs her/his interlocutors about what Anne said. Therefore, it will be manifested to her/his interlocutors (i) what Anne said and (ii) that s/he has manifested what Anne said. In fact, making something manifest is a way to direct the attention of somebody to something. Hence, by reporting Anne's words, (i) s/he directs the attention of her/his interlocutors to Anne's words and (ii) s/he directs the attention of her/his interlocutors to the fact that s/he has directed their attention to Anne's words.

Reported speech is, thus, a way to direct the attention of interlocutors to what the original speaker said. If pointing is a means to direct one's attention to an object, then reported speech can be interpreted as a form of pointing. By reporting Anne's words, people indicate them in some way; they make them salient, and therefore, they direct the attention of their interlocutors to those words. However, if this interpretation of reported speech is on the right track, maintaining that sharing is a form of pointing does not actually distinguish sharing from quoting. The two cases are very similar: in quoting, a meta-representation of the original representation is created. By making this meta-representation manifest, the speaker also makes the original representation manifest. When sharing a message, a copy of the original message is created. This copy will be present on the reposters' contacts' walls. The reposters' contacts will be able to see this copy, and thus, they will be able to access the content of the original message. We can interpret this as follows: by publishing a copy of the original message, reposters make that copy manifest to their followers or friends. Therefore, reposters direct the attention of their followers to that copy and then, indirectly, to the original message.

One might try to resist this argument and claim that even if we interpret sharing as pointing, there are some differences between sharing and quoting. For example, in reported speech, the meta-representation is never a perfect copy of the representation. Although the meta-representation is similar in many aspects to the representation, it is not identical to it: the medium may be different as well as the intonation, tone, speaking rate, pauses, hesitations, pronunciation, calligraphy, layout, and so forth (on this point, see e.g., the thorough and concise synthesis of Allan, 2016, pp. 211—212). Conversely, in sharing, a perfect reproduction of the original message is created. However, this disanalogy does not seem to be important: basically, identity is the extreme case of similarity. Similarity may be strong enough to become a perfect similarity. The perfect

similarity between copy and original does not invalidate the structural analogy between sharing and quoting: in both cases, a (more or less faithful) representation of the original message is created, and this copy is made manifest to the addressees with the aim of directing their attention to the original message and to the fact that reporters have made it manifest to them.

A second possible objection is the following (cf. Marsili, 2021, p. 10470): on Twitter, through the function of sharing, it is possible to interact *directly* with the original message. For instance, it is possible to put a like to the original message or to repost it. It is worth noting that if users "like" a reposted message on Twitter, the "like" refers to the original message and not to the reposted one.[3] In reported speech, we cannot do something comparable. Once again, it may be asked whether these disanalogies are substantial. Indeed, in "liking" a reposted message, users do not have direct access to the original message; they continue acting on the copy present on the wall. Admittedly, on Twitter, a "like" will be added to the original message, but it is a reaction to it, not a direct access to it. If a person reports Anne's words, her/his interlocutors may easily react to her speech. For instance, they might approve or disapprove of what she has said. Alternatively, after one's report of Anne's words, their interlocutors might, in turn, report Anne's speech to others. In reporting her words, they can directly say something like, "Anne has said that *p*"; they need not say, "X has said that Anne said that *p*." Therefore, even someone who listens to reported speech may react to what the original speaker has said and report, in turn, the original message. Therefore, there is no substantial difference between sharing and reported speech.

One may object that, nonetheless, there are still some differences. Twitter, for instance, will not distinguish between a "like" directly received by a message and a 'like' received by the repost of this message; it will simply count as "like", but there exists a straightforward difference between reacting to the words someone just said and reacting to a reported speech. However, we may wonder whether this difference is relevant enough; both direct reactions to Anne's words and reactions to Anne's reported words are, in any case, reactions to what Anne said. Why not consider them in the same way?

We conclude that it is not possible to distinguish the theory of pointing from the theory of quoting. If we interpret sharing as a kind of pointing, we may argue that quoting is also a form of pointing; therefore, in this respect, there are no relevant differences between sharing and quoting. In Section 2, we have shown that other differences do exist: quoting is an assertion with truth conditions, and sharing does not seem to be so. However, the theory of quoting does not insist on these differences and instead proposes another one, which turns out to be weak because quoting can also easily be interpreted as an action aimed at drawing an interlocutor's attention to the original message.

Lastly, there are cases, indeed peculiar, in which a user does not repost a message to draw attention to it, as (Pepp et al., forthcoming) point out. Their example is as follows. Suppose that @Nora retweets a post, "Roblox rules!", by her favourite Roblox YouTuber star @it'sakeila. Suppose further that (1) all of @Nora's Twitter followers are also enthusiastic followers of @it'sakeila and so have already seen the original post and (2) that @Nora's followers all know that all of them have seen the original post. In this case, @Nora's aim does not seem to be that of drawing attention to a post that all the others have already seen, but that of displaying her appreciation of the original message to her followers. Therefore, it appears that the act of pointing (i.e., drawing attention to a post) is not essential to sharing, although it often accompanies it. Indeed, there can be cases in which someone shares a message for reasons other than drawing attention to something.

The arguments put forward in this section also apply against Arielli (2018)'s thesis, according to which 'an act of sharing is [...] a speech act whose aim is to direct the attention of other people to a content, stating (or expressing) its shareworthiness' (p. 253). This thesis disregards the fact that when a content is shared, the object of attention is not the original content but the (perfect) copy of original content. On the other hand, this thesis makes

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[3]However, the same does not apply to other social networks such as Facebook. On Facebook, a "like" to the shared content counts as a "like" to the shared message. To put your "like" to the original message, you have to trace back to it and then put a "like".

an aspect that is not always associated with sharing (although it very often is) essential: the presumption that the content is interesting in some respects may not be present in some acts of sharing.

4 | SHARING AS A BASIC ACT OF COPYING AND DISTRIBUTING

(Pepp et al., forthcoming) maintain that sharing cannot be connected with a unique illocutionary act[4] but only with a range of illocutionary acts. The illocutionary act that the reposter in fact performs depends on the context in which sharing occurs, the identity of senders, their followers, and so on. They conclude that sharing must be a more basic act than an illocutionary act. They compare retweeting with the utterance of a declarative sentence, such as "Snow is white." This sentence can be uttered with different illocutionary aims in different contexts: the mere utterance of this sentence does not determine its illocutionary force, which is instead established by other contextual factors. In fact, they argue that there is also an important difference. Although a declarative sentence does not entail any illocutionary act, it is disposed toward having a particular illocutionary force: assertion. By contrast, this is not so for retweets; there is no default illocutionary act associated with pure retweeting because it lacks the literal meaning or content that makes an act of uttering a declarative sentence well suited to be an assertion.

(Pepp et al., forthcoming)'s theory accounts for the range of aims for which sharing is made. Such an illocutionary aim can be directing attention to a certain post, providing information, expressing agreement for certain statements, or a further illocutionary aim suggested by the context.

Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken's view is interesting. They correctly distinguish the act of sharing from the aims that can be achieved with this act. We have to be careful not to confuse a basic act, such as sharing, with the acts that we mainly perform through that basic act. They suppose, however, that sharing is the basis of illocutionary acts. This is not necessarily so. While we agree that sharing is a basic act, we believe that it is an act structurally similar to photocopying and distributing a document. The act of photocopying and distributing is not necessarily a communicative act[5] and, therefore, an illocutionary act. As we will show, it is communicative in certain contexts. However, in other contexts, the act of photocopying and distribution is definitely not a communicative act. We believe that the same can be said about the sharing act, and we will argue this in greater detail in the next section.

4.1 | Reposting and phatic acts

First, those who perform an illocutionary act usually produce a sequence of signs or gestures endowed with meaning on the basis of which the speech act is performed. The production of this sequence of signs or gestures is a phatic act .[6] Can the production of a copy of a document also be interpreted as a phatic act? In a certain sense, yes: a sequence of signs is produced after all. However, in another sense, no: it is the system that produces the copy, not the user. The user only orders the system to produce it.

The simple push of a photocopier button cannot be interpreted as the personal production of a sequence of signs. The user has made sure that the machine produces a copy of the original signs, but this seems to be a different operation from the personal production of signs.

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[4]Recall that, according to Austin, illocutions are the actions done in using a sentence. Statements, promises, orders, etc. are types of illocutionary acts (Austin, 1962, pp. 98–101).

[5]In this paper, we use "communication" in the sense of (Sperber & Wilson, 1986): an intention is communicative if the agent intends to inform the audience of his/her informative intention. In turn, an intention is informative if the agent intends to inform the audience of something.

[6]Recall that, according to Austin, the phatic act is the part of the locutionary act that concerns its phonetic, grammatical, and lexical characteristics (Austin, 1962, pp. 94–98).

Sharing is more like photocopying than the first-hand production of certain signs. Just as those who push the copy button on the photocopier make sure that the machine produces a copy of the message, those who push the share button on a social network make sure that the system produces a copy of the original message on their contacts' walls. However, just as we are reluctant to interpret photocopying as a phatic act, we should be reluctant to interpret sharing in this way.

In confirmation of this, it can be observed that it is possible to photocopy a chapter of a book without having read it. Likewise, it is possible to share a message without having read it. For instance, a user, @madreposter, can decide to share any message that another user, @Oposter, has posted to please @Oposter. Often, @madreposter does not even read what @Oposter has written: it is sufficient that @madreposter sees that the message has been written by @Oposter to share it. The disanalogy with the phatic act is straightforward: the phatic act is the conscious production of syntactically well-formed signs belonging to a language. If an agent does not know which signs s/he is producing, then we cannot speak of a phatic act. However, it is possible to share something without knowing what is being shared. Again, the correct comparison seems to be with making a copy rather than with a phatic act.

Therefore, we cannot speak of phatic acts with regard to reproduced signs and content. However, there is another way to interpret reposting as a phatic act; the very gesture of reposting might be interpreted in this way. In this case, the phatic act would not concern the reproduced signs since we have shown that the mere reproducing a sign cannot be compared with the first-hand production of the sign itself. Yet, gestures in general can be the basis of a communicative act. The reproduction and distribution of a document is a particular gesture, and thus, as every gesture, it could be the basis of a communicative act. In the next section, we examine whether this is a feasible option.

4.2 | Sharing is not necessarily a communicative act

Suppose that a person photocopies a document written by others in many copies and distributes it to other persons (who s/he may or may not know) through flyers. Can this act be interpreted as an illocutionary act?

As we have shown in the previous section, we cannot say that persons who photocopy and distribute perform communicative acts with regard to the *content* of what they spread. Signs have been produced by the author, and the simple action of copying cannot be interpreted as a new first-hand sign production. Nonetheless, the behaviour of photocopying and distributing itself can be communicative, at least in some cases; through that action, people may want to communicate something. By *exhibiting* such an action, they may communicate, for example, that they agree with the content of what they are distributing. For instance, we assume by default that someone who distributes political or ideological flyers agrees with the content of those flyers. However, other types of communication are also possible. For instance, a person can copy and distribute a message to deride or discredit the author if the message contains evident mistakes or advances an absurd thesis. In such a case, by exhibiting their actions of copying and distributing, they will communicate their attitude of scorn and derision toward the author of the message.

Nonetheless, the act of copying and distributing is not necessarily communicative. By copying and distributing, people do not necessarily desire for their behaviour to be a sign of an attitude or content they wish to communicate. Let us assume, for instance, that some persons are paid by the author for the message to photocopy and distribute it. They are not interested in the content of the message, which they have not even read. They distribute it for purely economic reasons. In this case, their act is not communicative. Likewise, those who copy and distribute flyers on behalf of another person, and for economic reasons only, are not performing a communicative act. Their actions are not meant to be the basis of any illocutionary act.

Moreover, sometimes it may not be clear why somebody is copying and distributing a certain content: because s/he agrees with it, s/he wants to mock it, s/he wants to inform people, or s/he is paid for doing so? The reason may not be clear, and the people who copy and distribute may wish for the reasons to remain unclear. In this case,

too, the act of copying and distributing cannot be considered communicative. Those who perform this act do not wish for their act to be interpreted in some way; therefore, they communicate nothing.

Finally, there are cases in which it is difficult to judge whether the one who copies and distributes is performing a communicative act. Let us suppose that some agents copy and distribute only to spread a piece of news. They do not want to express any attitude; they simply want to make sure that that piece of news reaches as many people as possible. In doing so, do they perform a communicative act?

One might argue that they do. In this case, the aim of the act that they perform is to manifest a certain content to their interlocutors, and they wish that their intention of making manifest that content is manifest. If we assume Sperber and Wilson (1986)'s definition of communication, then their acts seem to be communicative.

However, some issues arise. Contrary to the usual, their communicative intention is not based on a phatic act and not even on a gesture or facial expression but on the copy and distribution of a document. This makes their communicative act peculiar: in normal communicative cases, the person who communicates produces a sign or a sequence of signs that are interpreted by the addressees and help them, together with some contextual and encyclopaedic information, to understand the communicative intention of the person who intends to communicate. However, the person who photocopies and distributes does not produce any signs but only copies and distributes the signs produced by others. In light of this, even though the intention of the person who photocopies and distributes is to spread a certain piece of information, one might argue that the communicative intention should not be attributed to the person who distributes the copies but to the person who produces the original message. Those who copy and distribute are just a means for this intention to achieve its aim. The role of those who copy and distribute would be like that of a publishing company for an author: by printing and distributing the copies of a book, the company helps the authors to achieve their communicative aims. However, the communicative intention should be attributed to the author and not to the publishing company; we would not say that the publishing company has communicated something but that the author has communicated something by means of the publishing company.

In response to this argument, it might be observed that there are important differences between publishing companies and those who copy and distribute to spread a piece of news. A document can be written to reach a certain public. Those who copy and distribute might want it to reach a larger or different public. This may be interpreted as a new communicative intention. If the author has the intention of manifesting the content of the document to a public X, those who copy and distribute it might have the intention of manifesting the content of the document to a public Y. Should we interpret this intention as a *new* communicative intention? Does the distributor have a communicative intention *different* from that of the author?

These are difficult questions. We do not have a clear answer to them. On the one hand, the author has produced a set of signs s to ensure that, through s and some contextual and encyclopaedic information, it will be manifested to X that the author has the intention to manifest a certain meaning. On the other hand, those who copy and distribute want the content that the author desires to communicate to X also to be manifested to Y. We might say that those who copy and distribute *expand* the communicative intention of the author. From a certain point of view, the intention is still the same (to manifest a certain content c through s and to manifest the intention to manifest it); however, this intention is addressed to a public that the author did not have in mind. We probably face a borderline case in which it is difficult to judge, and thus, we will not try to do so here. We believe that it is difficult to exclude both that we are dealing with a communicative act and that the distributors do not perform any communicative act. If it is communication, it is a borderline case of communication.

There are, therefore, cases in which we can interpret the act of copying and distributing as a communicative act (for instance, when an attitude of agreement or derision is expressed), and there are other cases in which such an act is interpretable as noncommunicative (for example, when the action is performed solely for an economic return). Finally, there are cases in which it is difficult to judge whether it is a communicative act (for instance, when a piece of news is simply spread, and the one who copies and distributes it is only a means for its dissemination).

The main thesis defended here is that what is true for those who copy and distribute is also true for those who repost a message on a social network or forward someone's email to other addresses.[7] These actions are basic and can be performed for several purposes. As we have shown, one of the most common is that one agrees with the content of the message and wants to broadcast it to a larger public. In this case, one wishes to express an act of agreement with the content of the shared message. Alternatively, one can share a message for deriding or discrediting the author if the message contains evident mistakes. However, there are cases of reposting in which no speech act is definitely performed. For instance, a person can be paid by people to re-post all their messages. Suppose that thisperson is not interested in their posts, that s/he does not read them, and that s/he reposts their messages only for an economic return. In such a case, s/he is not performing an illocutionary act, and s/he is a mere means for the fulfilment of the communicative intention of the author. This is even clearer if we take into account that this work could be made by a bot that automatically reposts any message of the author. It would be bizarre to attribute a communicative intention to such a bot. In other cases, someone can repost without wishing to express any attitude toward the content of what is reposted and with-out wishing that others interpret their action in some way. In this case too, reposting cannot be interpreted as an illocutionary act.

Finally, one can repost with the sole intention of spreading a piece of news without expressing any attitude to-ward it. In such a case, as we have explained above, it is not clear whether the act of sharing should be interpreted as a mere means of expanding the communicative intention of the original author or as a new communicative intention.

In conclusion, it is not necessary for reposters to perform a speech act; their actual intention is clarified by the context. However, even though reposting is not necessarily an illocutionary act, there is an aspect of Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken's view that is worth pursuing: reposting is a basic act that can be performed for different aims. It would be in vain to search for an aim common to every reposter.

Our thesis highlights the *physical* aspects of reposting. Photocopying implies the use of a machine for per-forming a physical operation, and distributing is also an operation that has evident physical implications because it entails sending copies to addresses. Reposting in a social network makes all these operations easier and requires minimal energy consumption. However, the fact remains that reposting implies ordering a machine to perform a physical operation: copying the message to the reposters' contacts' walls. Admittedly, it is a much more rarefied operation with respect to analogous past operations. However, as with all computer operations, it is an operation made on the bits of the system and, therefore, a physical operation.

5 | OBJECTIONS

In the previous section, we defended the view that there is a structural resemblance between photocopying and distributing, on the one hand, and sharing a message in a social network, on the other. The basic idea is that these two actions are similar, and that what we can say about photocopying and distributing can also be said about sharing. The similarity between the two kinds of actions is determined by the fact that in both cases no new content is produced, but a machine is ordered to reproduce an already existing content. We do not argue that the two actions are identical. For instance, those who copy and distribute must perform these ac-tions in different temporal stages, whereas reposters share a message with a single click; this command both creates and publishes a copy. It follows that the tasks of copying and distributing can be done by different people, while the action of sharing is necessarily done by a single person. However, these differences do not

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[7]Email forwarding is an intermediate system between copying and distributing on the one side and reposting on social networks on the other side. Those who forward an email instruct their email client to produce one or more copies of the original mail and to send them to the addressees. Therefore, they also perform an act of copying and distributing.

prevent the resemblance from being sufficient enough to permit extending the analysis of one phenomenon to another.

One might disagree and believe that the differences between photocopying and distributing, on the one hand, and sharing, on the other, are so significant that we cannot assimilate the two actions. First, reposting is much easier and cheaper than physical copying and distribution. Sharing just requires a click.

However, this does not seem to be a sufficiently significant difference. In other words, there is *structural* similarity despite this difference. Consider the use of cars to travel from one place to another. Certainly, this activity has become easier and cheaper compared to 100 years ago. Driving a car 100 years ago was much more difficult than today because modern cars made driving easier and more automated. Once, some knowledge of mechanics and technology was required. Today, this is no longer necessary. Furthermore, the costs of a car and of car journeys have fallen, and this has made cars, which once were reserved to a privileged few, accessible to most. However, these differences notwithstanding, a car journey 100 years ago was not a *structurally different* activity from today. The fact that an activity is at a lower cost does not mean that it is an activity of a different type.

To be sure, ease of sharing has considerable social consequences. Copying and distributing require a commitment of time and resources that sharing does not require. Sharing is, therefore, a more widespread activity than photocopying and distributing. However, the ease of buying and using a car with respect to the past also has considerable social consequences. The use of cars is more widespread than 100 years ago. However, again, this does not imply that driving a car today is a different *type* of activity than 100 years ago.

One might advance another objection: the meaning of an action varies depending on the context in which it is performed. If that context is normal and frequent, then its meaning is different with respect to an exceptional context. The users of a social network are expected to post and share messages frequently. This is part of the "game rules" of a social network. Contrast this with the situation existing in the pre-internet world: there was no expectation that you would create, copy, or distribute texts and images to your friends. However, again, the context can change the *purpose* of an action and the *meaning* of that action but not the *type* of action that it is. To make this difference clear, consider compliments: in a culture where it is expected that people will compliment each other very often, a compliment does not mean much. In other cultures, like many parts of the United Kingdom or Scandinavia, where the positive is almost always downplayed, the same compliment means much more. However, the context can change the purpose, value, and meaning of a compliment, not the fact that in both contexts a compliment is given and, thus, that the same *kind* of action is performed.

Likewise, the ease of reposting on a social network, the normality of such an action, and the "game rules" for which users are expected to repost frequently can change the purpose, value, and meaning of sharing with respect to a context in which copying and distributing is not a normal action and requires a commitment that is usually not expected. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, in both cases, the same *kind* of action is performed. If we are structurally doing the *same thing* in the two cases, then we can extend the analysis of one case to the other.

6 | RESPONSIBILITY

A debate about the reposters' responsibility is ongoing among scholars. Let us assume that a reposter shares problematic content as a fake news or a post containing hate speech. Is the reposter responsible for this content? In November 2015, Donald Trump retweeted a post containing a fake news about the rate of white homicide victims killed by African–Americans (the post stated that 81% of the victims were killed by African-Americans, while the real figure is 15%) (cf. Greenberg, 2015). Trump defended himself by claiming that he had simply reposted a statistic made by others: "[...] am I gonna check every statistic? [...] All it was is a retweet. It wasn't from me" (Colvin, 2016). This defence compares sharing with some forms of reported speech. If reporters make clear that they are reporting somebody else's words, usually they are not considered responsible for the reported content but only for the faithfulness to the original message. As Rini (2017) states: "When called out for posting material

that is false or offensive, people often insist (truthfully) that they are not the originator of the content—they only passed it along. They often insist that 'a retweet is not an endorsement' and claim that they pass along content to encourage discussion, not necessarily to stand behind it" (p. E47).

However, we also have the intuition that those who share defective social media items are somehow responsible for their diffusion: those who disseminate fake news or offensive material contribute to the worsening of the social network environment and have a noxious influence on other users' attitudes. So, we have conflicting intuitions on the responsibility of reposters. As Rini (2017) points out,

> social media is a relatively new way of distributing information, and we have yet to settle on norms for how to interpret its use. We understand that a newspaper article with an embedded quotation is not necessarily affirming the content of the quote. But we do not yet have a common understanding about social media shares [...] Social media sharing operates under unstable norms. People are happy to be understood as asserting the contents of shared news stories that turn out accurate (especially if they "scooped" their friends) but insist that they meant no such assertion when trouble emerges. And, for now, our accountability conventions seem to tolerate this instability; we may roll our eyes at "a retweet is not an endorsement," but we do not (yet) place most embarrassed retweeters in the same category as outright liars or bullshitters. (pp. E47—8).

We believe that our proposal can shed some light on this uncertain situation. In particular, we believe that we do not need new rules, specific to social networks, for sharing.

In line with our thesis put forward in Section 4, we maintain that the reposters have the same responsibility as those who photocopy and distribute. If the distributed material is offensive for some groups of people or for some individuals, or if, for example, it contains fake news, racial slurs or insults, then those who copy and distribute that material have some responsibility for its dissemination. To what extent they are responsible and how much what they have done is censurable or prosecutable depends on a number of factors, such as the nature of the distributed content, the quantity of distributed copies, and the knowledge of what is distributed. In any case, those who copy and distribute cannot simply say that they are just a means of disseminating a message and that they have no responsibility for its content. In many countries, there are laws that hold both the authors, the editorial director, and the publisher liable for the content published by a newspaper or a publishing house.[8]

Our proposal does not require specific moral and legal rules for sharing offensive or fake content through a social network. In our opinion, the rules currently in force regarding the copy and dissemination of material produced by others should be extended to sharing. Since they are the same kind of action, even though they are performed by different means, they should be regulated by the same norms. We believe that it is an advantage of our proposal that it solves the problem of the responsibility of reposters, which has often puzzled scholars and users.

7 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, different theories of reposting have been analysed and criticized. It has been shown that reposting cannot be considered a form of quoting or indicating. Conversely, it has been argued that reposting is a particular

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[8]For instance, in the USA, under standard common-law principles "a book publisher or a newspaper publisher can be held liable for anything that appears within its pages. The theory behind this 'publisher' liability is that a publisher has the knowledge, opportunity, and ability to exercise editorial control over the content of its publications" (cf. https://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/publishing-information-harms-anothers-reputation, last access 01/02/2023). In the UK, a publishing house is generally liable for anything it publishes on its pages, and it cannot rely on the fact that someone else said it (or said it first) to escape liability (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/31/crossheading/responsibility-for-publication, last access 01/02/2022). In Italy the law n. 47/1948 art. 11 states that the author of the publication and the publishing company are jointly civilly liable for crimes committed through the printed words.

case of copying and distributing, which is much easier than in the past. Copying and distributing are basic acts and, as such, can be the basis of other different acts, which are not necessarily communicative. However, even when the act is not communicative, it does not exempt reposters from any responsibility.

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