Ideas as Infections: Introduction to the Problematics of Cognitive Metaparasitism

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Аннотация

The article deals with the concept of metaparasite in the cultural and communicative sphere. Relying on the memetic theory of R. Dawkins and the cognitive framework proposed by K. Anokhin, the authors explore the dynamics of metaparasitism and the ability of the metaparasite to change its environment beyond the original context. The article also considers the challenges that have emerged in the post-truth era, embodied in such phenomena as fake news, etc., and emphasizes the need to find effective responses to threats to psychological and sociocultural security. The article formulates a set of communicative techniques aimed at ensuring safety for both the communicator and the recipient, and presents the feedback system as a key component of any rational system. Based on the results of the study, the authors propose a strategy aimed at protecting society against the harmful effects of metaparasites.

1

Introduction

2   In the space of human thought and in the communication field, ideas roam the landscapes of our collective consciousness, often with a speed and energy that can rival the characteristics of the most tenacious biological parasites. The phenomenon known as metaparasitism is an interesting topic for philosophical investigation, especially in the context of contemporary society, where digital media have catalyzed the dissemination of information to unprecedented levels. The concept of metaparasitism allows us to explore metaphorical parallels between biological parasitism and the transmission of ideas, ideologies and information in the socio-cultural spheres of humanity.

3   In biological terms, a metaparasite (hyperparasite) is a parasite whose host, often an insect, is also a parasite. That is, a metaparasite parasitizes another parasite, creating a hierarchical level of parasitism within the host [16].

4   Metaparasitism in the socio-humanitarian sense essentially refers to how certain ideas or narratives can "infect" individuals and communities, spreading and multiplying like a parasite in a host organism. These ideas cling to the substrates of our consciousness, using our cognitive resources to survive and thrive. In the digital age, the virulence of such metaparasites is enhanced by the interconnectedness of global networks, where information spreads rapidly and mutates with ease, often outpacing a person's ability to critically assess its veracity or the intent of its sender.

5   The relevance of metaparasitism in modern society cannot be overemphasized. As we are living through an era marked by "post-truth" (some even call modernity as the era of post-truth) and "alternative facts", understanding the mechanisms of how metaparasites develop becomes crucial for preserving epistemic integrity and/or ensuring epistemic security [15]. The digital landscape has become a fertile ground for metaparasites that can influence public opinion, shape political agendas, and even destabilize the foundations of what we consider knowledge.

6   The authors of the study pursued several goals. First, to try to create a reliable theoretical basis for justifying the concept of metaparasitism, relying on an interdisciplinary approach. Second, to demonstrate the impact of metaparasitic tendencies on contemporary thought by examining a number of contemporary phenomena, such as ethical challenges to society and the need for epistemic security.

Third, to propose strategies for immunizing collective consciousness from the harmful influence of harmful metaparasites that seem relevant.

7 Within the framework of the study, the authors present a variety of manifestations of metaparasitism, from the spread of conspiracy theories to ideological constructs in the contemporary world shaped by digital platforms. The work draws on actor-network theory in an attempt to visualize the dynamics of metaparasitic proliferation.

8 Attempting to interpret ideas as infections is not just an academic exercise; this work can have important practical implications. By recognizing the patterns and pathways of metaparasites, one may be better prepared to distinguish truth from falsehood, to promote a more informed and sustainable public discourse, and to effectively protect the integrity of the collective cognitive environment.

9 This study was born in the contours of the debate about the nature of the ideas we keep in our minds, how they shape the reality we perceive and construct; whether humans are just a vessel for metaparasites or have the ability to influence and affect their evolution. The authors believe that the attempt to answer these questions and the work presented can be useful for discussing the future of the individual and society.

10
Theoretical basis

11 The theoretical framework of our study of metaparasitism aims to connect the theories of information and the philosophical foundation on which our concept of metaparasitism is based. In this section, we review the existing literature on these issues and present the philosophical dimensions that can give depth to the concept of metaparasitism. Below, we present a review of the existing literature on information theory, which can be useful for reflexing the concept of metaparasitism. The information theory, developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, is a mathematical model of communication that is fundamental to understanding information transfer [3]. However, as noted in the works of A.V. Sheludyakov and other authors, the Shannon-Weaver model considers primarily the technical aspects of signal transmission and decoding, leaving the semantic evaluation of information outside its purview [12]. This limitation becomes especially noticeable when considering the phenomenon of metaparasitism, when the semantic content of information is of paramount importance.

12 The literature that can be related or seem close to understanding the concept of metaparasitism is not as extensive as that on information theory. However, the body of work in close or parallel topics is increasing as a response to the challenges posed by the digital age. In particular, the phenomenon of metaparasite has been studied by O.N. Gurov in a number of contexts, including the problems of spreading misinformation, as well as infodemia during the coronacrisis [5]. Richard Dawkins' work on memes, as well as K.V. Anokhin's study of the "Cognitome" are valuable sources that provide a biological and cognitive basis for understanding how ideas reproduce and spread in human culture, similar to the behavior of genes in biological systems [6].

13
Philosophical foundations of metaparasitism

14   The philosophical study of metaparasitism requires delving into the nature of ideas and recognizing their ability to influence the consciousness they inhabit. It is also important to study consciousnesses subject to the influence of metaparasitism. Drawing on the memetic theory proposed by Dawkins, we can view ideas as entities competing for the limited resource of human attention. This competition is influenced by a variety of factors, including the emotional resonance of ideas, their simplicity or complexity, and their ability to be consistent with pre-existing beliefs.

15   In addition, Aristotle's work on "episteme" and the nature of knowledge lay the foundation for understanding epistemological problems arising from metaparasitism [2]. In this context, the concept of "epistemic security" becomes crucial, as society must and tries to deal with the threats posed to knowledge by the abundance and excess of information in parallel with the attention deficit accompanied by the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles.

16   The philosophical discourse on metaparasitism also intersects with ethics, particularly in exploring the mechanisms of creating and disseminating information that may be manipulative or false. The ethical implications of metaparasitism relate to the question of the responsibility of individuals and society to such phenomena. In considering the role of metaparasites in shaping interdisciplinary discourse, we must also reflect on the ethical dimensions of this process.

17   By synthesizing existing literature and relevant philosophical perspectives, the proposed study can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of metaparasitism. The factor of horizontal transfer of methods and technologies between disciplines should also be noted. The concept of horizontal transfer, borrowed from biological science, refers to the movement of genetic material between organisms in a way different from traditional reproduction [14]. This idea, applied to the field of knowledge and technology, speaks to the interdisciplinary exchange that characterizes a range of contemporary scientific research. The literature on this topic, as seen in the work of scholars such as Thomas Kuhn, who has explored scientific paradigm shifts, demonstrates that significant advances often occur when ideas and methods from one field are unexpectedly applied to others [10]. In the context of metaparasitism, horizontal transfer can be understood as the interdisciplinary spread of ideas, where a concept that originated in one field of knowledge can influence and transform another. This phenomenon is evident in the example of how digital technologies, originally developed for specific purposes, have revolutionized such diverse and unexpected fields as health care, education, and the arts.

18   The work of Frithjof Capra in turn emphasizes the interconnectedness of current scientific understanding and suggests that a holistic approach is necessary to fully understand complex systems [8].

19

The role of metaparasites in shaping interdisciplinary discourse

20   Metaparasites play an important role in shaping interdisciplinary discourse, acting as agents of cognitive contagion that help connect disparate fields of study. As ideas spread across disciplinary boundaries, they can mutate and adapt, leading to new

discoveries and innovations. However, this process has its own challenges. The spread of metaparasites can also lead to the dilution of complex concepts, oversimplification, and the inability to understand contexts, especially when ideas are too categorically or unreasonably removed from their organic space. The literature on the role of metaparasites in interdisciplinary discourse is still insuffiecient, but it is already clear that this phenomenon has a profound impact on the ways in which knowledge is constructed and disseminated.

21   Bruno Latour's heritage, and in particular his Actor-Network Theory (ANT), provides a useful framework for understanding how ideas circulate within and between networks of actors with both human and non-human natures. ANT suggests that the power and influence of an idea depends not only on its intrinsic merit, but also on the network of relationships that support its circulation [11]. Manipulative or false information can have far-reaching consequences, especially when it affects important areas such as public policy, scientific research, and social norms.

22   As we continue to develop the theoretical framework, we must ask ourselves: how do we ensure the integrity of ideas when they are transferred horizontally across disciplines? What mechanisms are in place to prevent concepts from being distorted when they become metaparasitic, and how can we create an environment in which interdisciplinary discourse ensures that our collective knowledge and understanding is enriched rather than impoverished?

23   These questions will guide our further investigation into the nature of metaparasitism and its impact on the evolution of knowledge in an increasingly interconnected world. The answers we offer can help to shape the contours of the theoretical framework of metaparasitism, and also to provide practical ideas for managing the dissemination of ideas in ways that promote the intellectual growth and well-being of society.

24

Metaparasitism and the evaluation of information

25   The writer Carl Zimmer argues that the parasite is the king of nature, and continuing his thought, we must note that in the realm of metaparasitism we describe, it is of paramount importance to evaluate information to determine the degree of truthfulness and true intentions behind the ideas that seek to master our cognitive landscapes [13]. To navigate this complex configuration, we propose a four-step algorithm for reflexively evaluating potentially manipulative or false information. This algorithm can serve a heuristic function for individuals and societies, as it can be used to critically evaluate metaparasitic ideas that appear in the information space. The presented model can be organized as follows:

26   1. Correlation with personal knowledge:

27 •   Does the information match what is already known and understood?
    •   How does it relate to established facts and evidence?
    •   How might personal biases and prejudices affect the interpretation of this information?

²⁸   2. Evaluating the source of information:

²⁹ •   Who is the author of the information, what is his/her credentials, expertise or experience?
   •   Is this source known for its reliability or does it have a history of spreading misinformation?

³⁰ •   What might be the source's motives in disseminating this particular information?

³¹   3. Evaluation of the presentation form:

³² •   How is the information presented? Is it disseminated through an authoritative channel or platform?
   •   Does it contain elements of sensationalism, does it aim for an emotional response, which can distort the perception of information?
   •   Does the style of presentation encourage critical perception of information, or does the text aim for perception to take place beyond rational analysis?

³³   4. Learning Objective:

³⁴ •   What is the intended result of disseminating this information?
   •   Is there a noticeable attempt to persuade, coerce or manipulate the audience to achieve certain goals?
   •   How can information serve the interests of individuals, groups or ideologies?

³⁵

Semantic ornamentation of metaparasites and its ideological implications

³⁶   Semantic ornamentation of metaparasites refers to layers of meaning and context that clothe the main idea, like decorative elements adorning a structure, enhancing its attractiveness and embedding it within a particular cultural or ideological framework. Such camouflage presents the metaparasite in an attractive and memorable way, facilitating its spread and acceptance. In this regard, the ideological implications of this phenomenon should be carefully considered. Semantic ornamentation can conceal and render invisible the true nature of information, and this in turn can lead to uncritical acceptance of potentially harmful or false ideas. The aesthetic appeal of an idea does not guarantee that it is true or ethical. Therefore, the study of the semantic ornamentation of a metaparasite seems to be an important element of the process of its reflexive evaluation. Reflecting on the role of the semantic ornament of metaparasites, we should answer the following questions:

³⁷ •   How does the aesthetics of information affect our perception of its truthfulness and importance?
   •   What responsibility does the communicator have to ensure that the decoration of ideas is not misleading?

- How can recipients of information cultivate the discernment necessary to see beyond the superficial appeal of metaparasites to what is actually lurking beneath them?

38   The answers to these questions provide a solid foundation for developing a framework for evaluating metaparasitic ideas that will provide an environment conducive to ensuring that our cognitive environment remains fertile ground for the growth of knowledge and understanding, rather than for the spread of lies and manipulation.

39

Metaparasitism in the context of actor-network theory

40   The concept of actor-network theory (ANT), primarily associated with the work of scholars such as Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, provides a valuable framework upon which the concept of metaparasitism can be productively built [1]. ANT argues that society is composed of networks of human and non-human "actors" or "actants" who interact with and influence each other. The resulting networks are not static; rather, they are dynamic and constantly evolving as connections are made and broken. In such a system, ideas can be seen as actors, capable of both influencing and being influenced by other elements of the network.

41   ANT is a promising framework for constructing the concept of metaparasitism because it offers a non-hierarchical approach to understanding how ideas spread and what impact they have on society. In the context of metaparasitism, ideas are not simply passive elements passed from one person to another; rather, they are active participants in a network, capable of changing the network itself and doing so. This perspective allows us to consider the complex pathways along which metaparasites travel, as well as their myriad interactions with the various actors in the network.

42   The horizontal transfer of methods and technologies across disciplines represents a key aspect of ANT and can confidently be applied to metaparasites. Just as genes can be transferred horizontally between different species, so ideas can cross disciplinary boundaries, transforming and being transformed during this process. This quality is facilitated by the diverse actors in the network - researchers, practitioners, technologies and even ideas themselves - who act as intermediaries, translating and adapting knowledge to new contexts.

43

The role of metaparasites in shaping interdisciplinary discourse

44   Metaparasites play a critical role in shaping interdisciplinary discourse. As ideas spread across fields, they can challenge established paradigms and stimulate the creation of new knowledge. However, metaparasites can also lead to confusion and oversimplification of complex concepts in some cases when they are taken out of their original context. ANT can help in understanding these processes by focusing on the relationships and interactions between different actors in the network. By considering the role of metaparasites within the ANT framework, we ask new theoretical and practical questions, such as how do ideas gain traction in a network and what are the

consequences of their propagation for the network as a whole, and how can we create networks that are, on the one hand, resistant to the negative effects of metaparasites, and at the same time open to useful "cross-pollination" of knowledge? Further exploration of the metaparasite concept within the ANT framework may contribute to a better understanding of how ideas spread, mutate, and influence the evolution of knowledge in different fields and domains.

45
"Meta-", metaparasitism and metaverses

46 Next, we will consider the indirect connection between metaparasitism and metaverses. Note that in socio-humanitarian discourse, the prefix "meta-" denotes the conceptual level of something that goes beyond or exceeds the essence itself [9]. This prefix has become relevant in the XX-XXI century due to its association with transcendence and, accordingly, the designation of the actual conceptual layer that is beyond or transcendent to the thing itself. Concepts prefixed with the prefix "meta-" are used in various fields of knowledge and practice, including philosophy, culture, and even technology, to describe phenomena that are above, beyond, or at a higher level than the represented entity, and are often associated with self-awareness, self-reflection, and transcendence. As separate concepts with the prefix "meta-" we can give the following examples: metacognition as a section of philosophy that studies the process of cognition in the context of society, the economy of the environment, etc.; metaability as skill to cognize and comprehend the world constants, moving towards the fundamentals of existence; and a number of others.

47 Therefore, the mainstreaming of the concept and specific projects of metaverses, such as those being developed by leading technology companies today, seems obvious, especially given the accelerated evolution of the digital space. In this context, virtual universes represent new platforms that should become a new space for human interaction, work, entertainment and daily activities. At the same time, they will potentially become breeding grounds for metaparasitism on a new scale, as immersive and interconnected environments should by definition facilitate the spread of metaparasitic phenomena. The huge volume and multilayered nature of information flows in such spaces should overload a human even more, leading to the information fatigue syndrome described by D. Lewis [7]. Such a state of cognitive overload can easily lead to unreasonable judgments and, accordingly, irrational decision-making. All this creates conditions for the development of cognitive vulnerability used by metaparasites (at the most obvious level in the form of manipulative or false ideas).

48
The Panopticon and its modern digital versions

49 The concept of the Panopticon, conceived by Jeremy Bentham and later reinterpreted by Michel Foucault, is a productive image for conceptualizing metaverses. According to the original idea, the Panopticon was to be designed as a circular prison with a central watchtower from which one guard could watch (or he might not exist, but it was unknown to the prisoners) all the prisoners while remaining unnoticed [4]. Thus was born the idea of impersonal and all-encompassing control. This architectural and

conceptual model was interpreted as a metaphor for the modern "surveillance society" in which the feeling of constant surveillance provides self-regulation and self-control for the subject. In the context of metaverses, the digital analog of the Panopticon is readily located technological possibilities of ubiquitous surveillance on digital platforms. Users should feel themselves under constant surveillance, both by the platform providers (government) and other users (society). In such a configuration, the digital environment should develop in such a way that the behavior (and consequently, the thinking) of a participant in metaverses will be influenced not only by a system of rules, but also by the implicit presence of an invisible but observing guardian. Under these conditions, the concept of metaparasitism in a global village can be conceptualized in the context of the phenomena of privacy, control, and surveillance. As users navigate virtual and hybrid spaces, they will encounter metaparasites that will influence their perceptions and behaviors. And this potential raises concerns at a minimum about privacy requirements and the extent to which user data can be collected, analyzed, and exploited - perhaps without the user's full consent or even awareness. Moreover, the influence on user thinking exerted by metaparasites in metaverses may extend beyond the digital realm, and affect beliefs and behaviors in the real world. The spread of post-truth narratives and fake news in metaverses can have consequences on a civilizational scale, provoking populism, consumerism and vulgarity, and consequently leading to polarization, fragmentation and conflict in society. These threats are serious, as humanity stands on the threshold of a new digital age, where, on the one hand, metaverses will provide unprecedented opportunities for communication and creativity, but, on the other hand, they also pose new challenges that must be addressed to prevent these hybrid and digital spaces from becoming fertile ground for the development of negative aspects of metaparasitism. It is necessary to strive to create virtual environments that foster positive interaction and give users the conditions and opportunities to critically perceive the information they encounter.

50

Ethical component of metaparasitism and strategy of immunization of public consciousness against metaparasites

51   The deliberate creation and spread of metaparasites creates serious ethical dilemmas. Manipulative ideas disguised as truth can distort public opinion and undermine the very basis of trust in society. The ethical implications in such scenarios are vast and multifaceted, prompting us to reflect on the responsibility of both individual actors and organizations and institutions to disseminate information. It is necessary to reflect on such complex issues as the balance between freedom of expression and the need to protect society from deliberate misinformation, as well as the extent and measure of responsibility of metaparasite creators for the consequences of their actions. This is all the more important because, as they have written, metaparasites can have a significant impact on public opinion, and can undermine the foundations of citizenship necessary for the functioning and development of a healthy society. In addition, metaparasites can threaten the autonomy of the individual by manipulating their choices and behavior. To protect public consciousness from harmful metaparasites, the authors propose the following strategy:

52 •   Education and critical thinking: Increase education to develop critical thinking skills that enable people to better analyze and evaluate information.

•   Media literacy: Promote media literacy to provide an understanding of how information is created and to teach the difference between credible and questionable sources.

•   Fact checking and verification: Stimulate fact checking and verification tools to assess the accuracy of information.

•   Ethical Standards: Develop and enforce ethical standards for information creators, including legal and ethical sanctions for the intentional dissemination of false information.

•   Technology Solutions: Implement technology solutions to detect and flag metaparasitic content such as deepfakes and other forms of generated media.

•   Open Dialogue: To create an atmosphere of open dialog where different points of view can be shared and discussed in a correct manner.

53
Conclusion

54   The study of metaparasitism, especially in the context of the emerging fields of metaverses and digital communication, provides a new perspective on the complex interplay between information, power, and human cognition. The deliberate creation and dissemination of metaparasites (in this context we can define them as information constructs designed to manipulate or deceive) raises serious ethical dilemmas and can have far-reaching consequences for society and individual autonomy.

55   The study shows that metaparasites are not just isolated information objects, but carry the memory of their origin, context, and ideological intentions of their creators. ANT provides a framework for understanding how these constructs move across and influence interconnected knowledge networks, crossing disciplinary boundaries and altering discourse. The philosophical significance of these findings is the recognition that truth and reality are often constructed and reconstructed in these networks. The post-truth era, driven and exacerbated by the rapid proliferation of information and the development of digital technologies, challenges traditional notions of truth and emphasizes the need to be critical of the information a subject consumes.

56   At the same time, the potential of metaparasitism in shaping public consciousness in a world where everything is connected to everything is, on the one hand, a cause for concern, but, on the other hand, sounds like a call to action. Metaverses and other promising digital projects open new horizons for the spread of metaparasites, which requires the development of strategies aimed at "inoculating" public consciousness with immunity against their harmful effects. The authors have proposed their vision of this strategy, the implementation of which can help to fight destructive tendencies, directing them in a positive direction. In future studies, a clearer description of the metaparasite concept is envisioned, which seems particularly relevant in the context of the prospects for the development of metaverses. In this regard, it seems important to formalize the very concept of metaverses, to define the order of

interaction between actors in metaverses, and to structure all the issues arising in this regard. It seems that the concept of metaparasite is promising for this kind of research.

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Abstract

The article deals with the concept of metaparasite in the cultural and communicative sphere. Relying on the memetic theory of R. Dawkins and the cognitive framework proposed by K. Anokhin, the authors explore the dynamics of metaparasitism and the ability of the metaparasite to change its environment beyond the original context. The article also considers the challenges that have emerged in the post-truth era, embodied in such phenomena as fake news, etc., and emphasizes the need to find effective responses to threats to psychological and sociocultural security. The article formulates a set of communicative techniques aimed at ensuring safety for both the communicator and the recipient, and presents the feedback system as a key component of any rational system. Based on the results of the study, the authors propose a strategy aimed at protecting society against the harmful effects of metaparasites.