

Report on online **dis**information

SPECIAL ISSUE ON CORONAVIRUS

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METHODOLOGY

In this Report we refer to the term «coronavirus» in a broad sense to describe all topics related to the current epidemic emergency. More precisely, the scientific name of "new coronavirus" (namely, the virus belonging to the coronaviruses «family» that had never been found in humans before) is "SARS-CoV-2", while the term "Covid-19" identifies the infectious disease caused by the virus.



This issue of the Report on Online Disinformation is dedicated to the analysis of information and disinformation production on the Covid-19 theme.

The figures shown are updated to March 22, 2020 in order to outline the information scenarios that characterize the Italian system one month after the beginning of the medical-health emergency in the country.

The special issue on the coronavirus of the Report on Online Disinformation is part of the activities of the **Roundtable on Digital Platform and Big Data - Covid-19 Emergency** set up by AGCOM to contribute, among other things, to the fight against online disinformation on issues related to the epidemic.

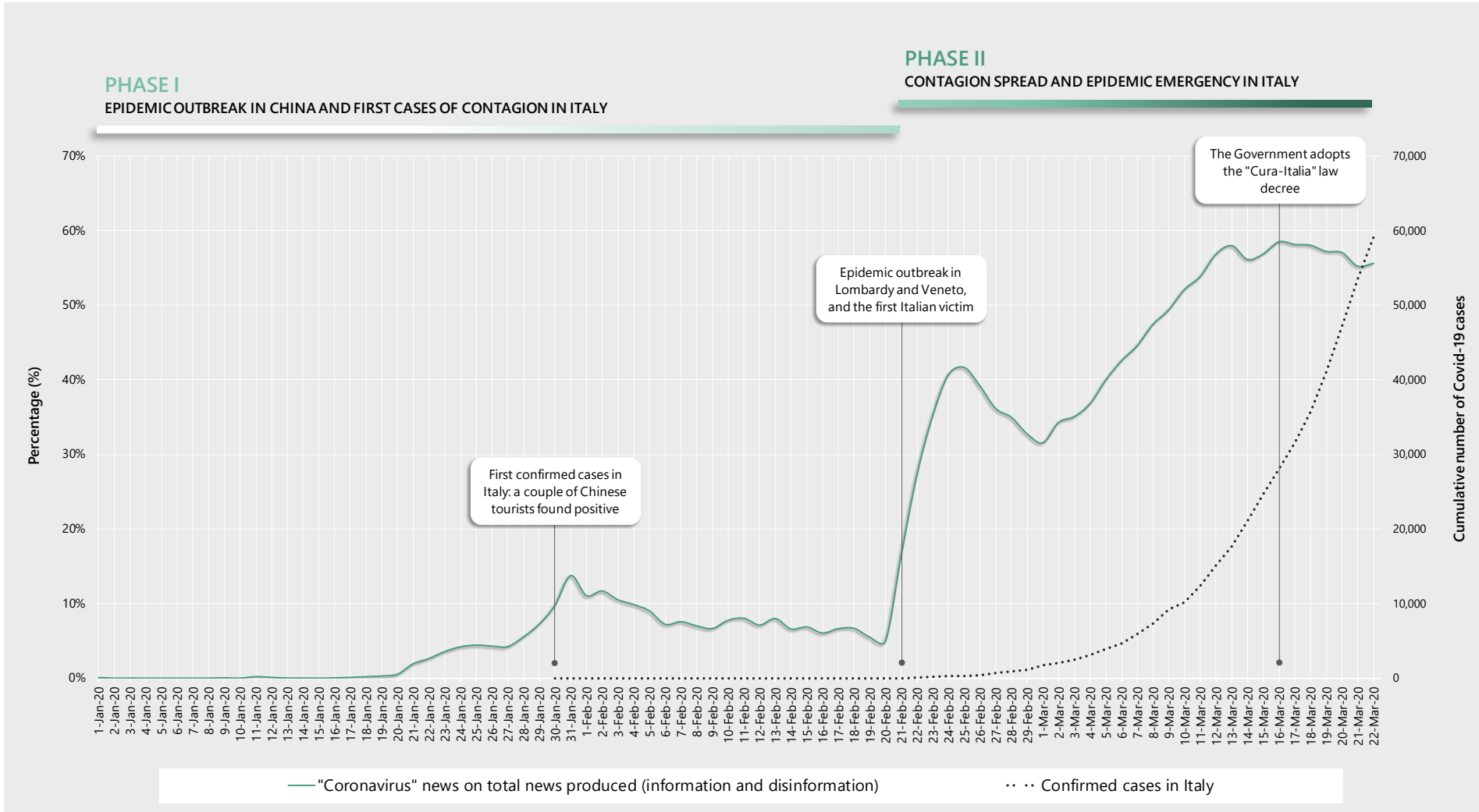


1

INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ON THE CORONAVIRUS

1.1 Media coverage of the coronavirus in Italy

Daily incidence of news on the coronavirus on total news produced



With the epidemic spreading in Italy the **media coverage** (newspapers, TV, radio, internet) of the coronavirus grows

NEWS ON THE CORONAVIRUS IN AN AVERAGE DAY

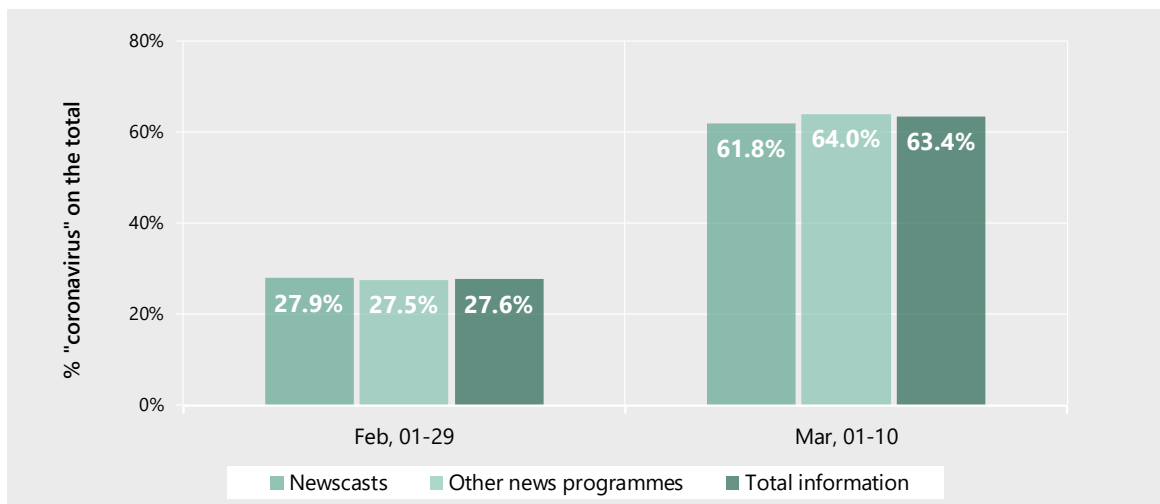
4% PHASE I
of the total JAN, 1 - FEB, 20

45% PHASE II
of the total FEB, 21 - MAR, 22

From January 1 to March 22 the Italian media have produced about **700,000 contents** regarding the coronavirus

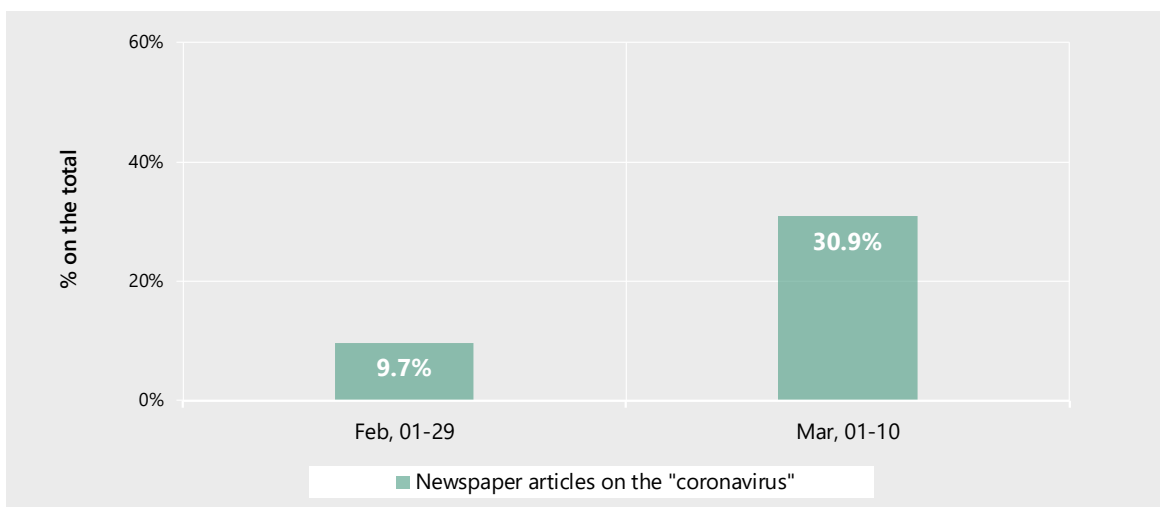
1.2 TV and newspapers: coverage of the coronavirus

Time dedicated to the coronavirus by the major TV channels^(*) (% of the total)

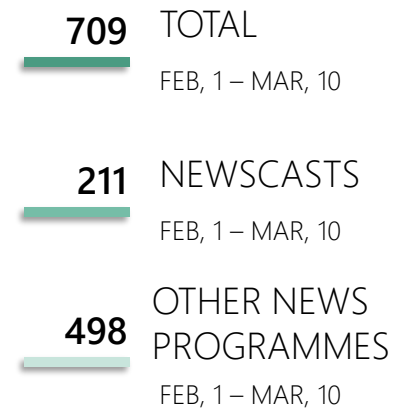


^(*) Rai 1, Rai 2, Rai 3, Canale 5, Italia 1, Rete 4, La7, TV8 and NOVE Fonte: elaborations of GECA Italia data

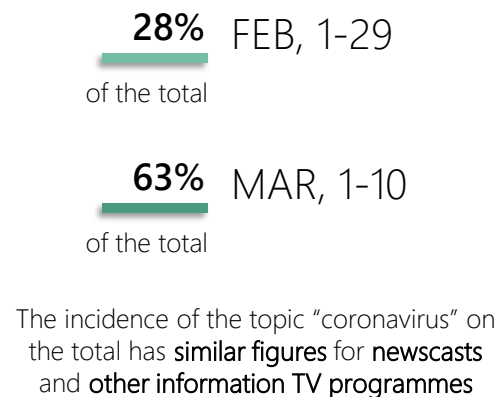
Articles dedicated to the coronavirus by national and local newspapers (% of the total)



HOURS DEDICATED TO THE CORONAVIRUS BY NEWS&INFORMATION TV PROGRAMMES



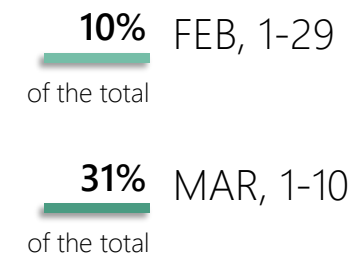
CORONAVIRUS INCIDENCE ON THE TOTAL HOURS OF THE NEWS&INFORMATION TV PROGRAMS



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES ON THE CORONAVIRUS

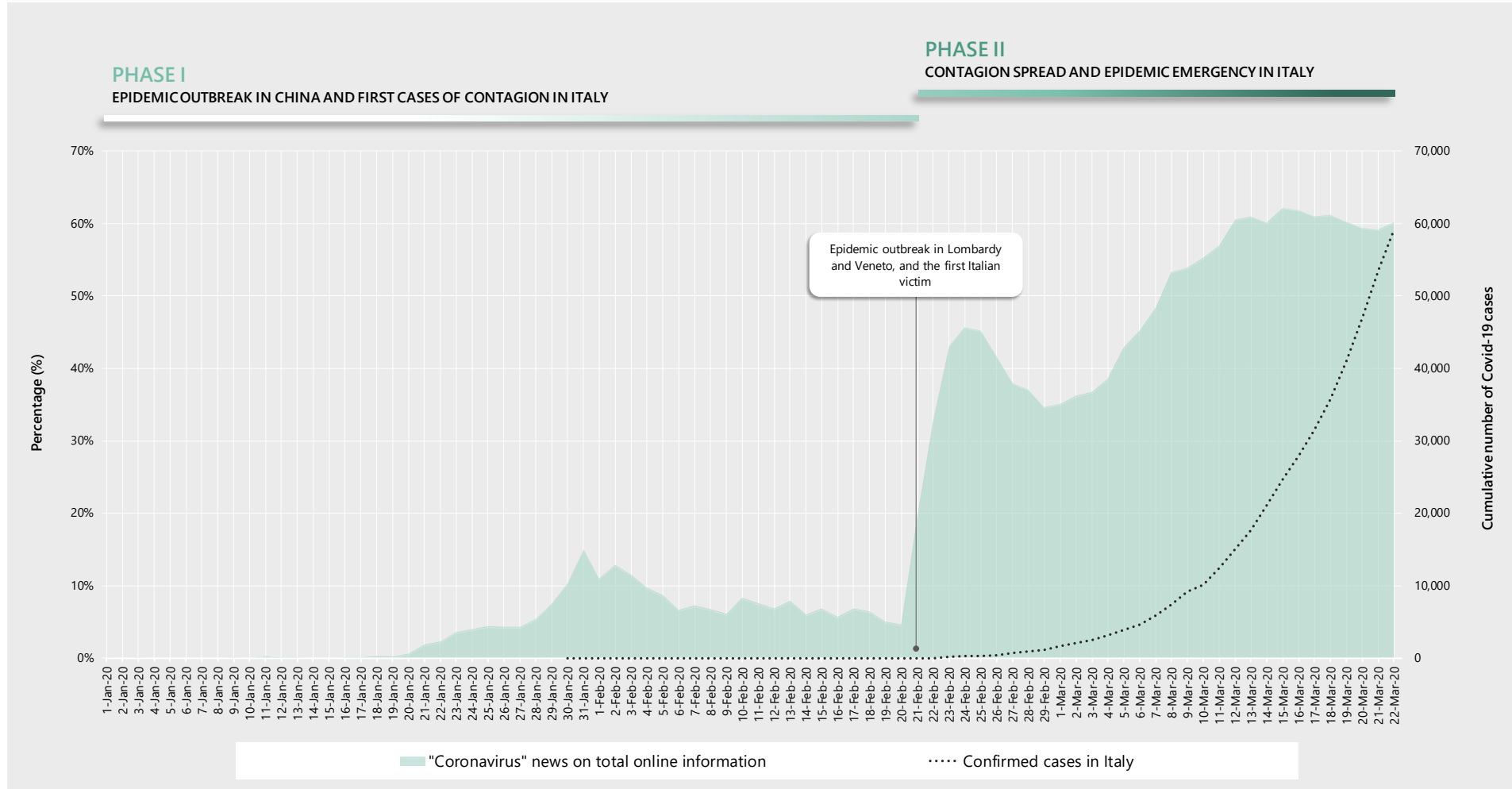


CORONAVIRUS INCIDENCE ON THE OVERALL NEWSPAPER ARTICLES



1.3 Online information: coverage of the coronavirus

Daily incidence of news on the coronavirus on total online information



NEWS ON THE CORONAVIRUS IN AN AVERAGE DAY

4% **PHASE I**
of the total online information
JAN, 1 – FEB, 20

49% **PHASE II**
of the total online information
FEB, 21 – MAR, 22

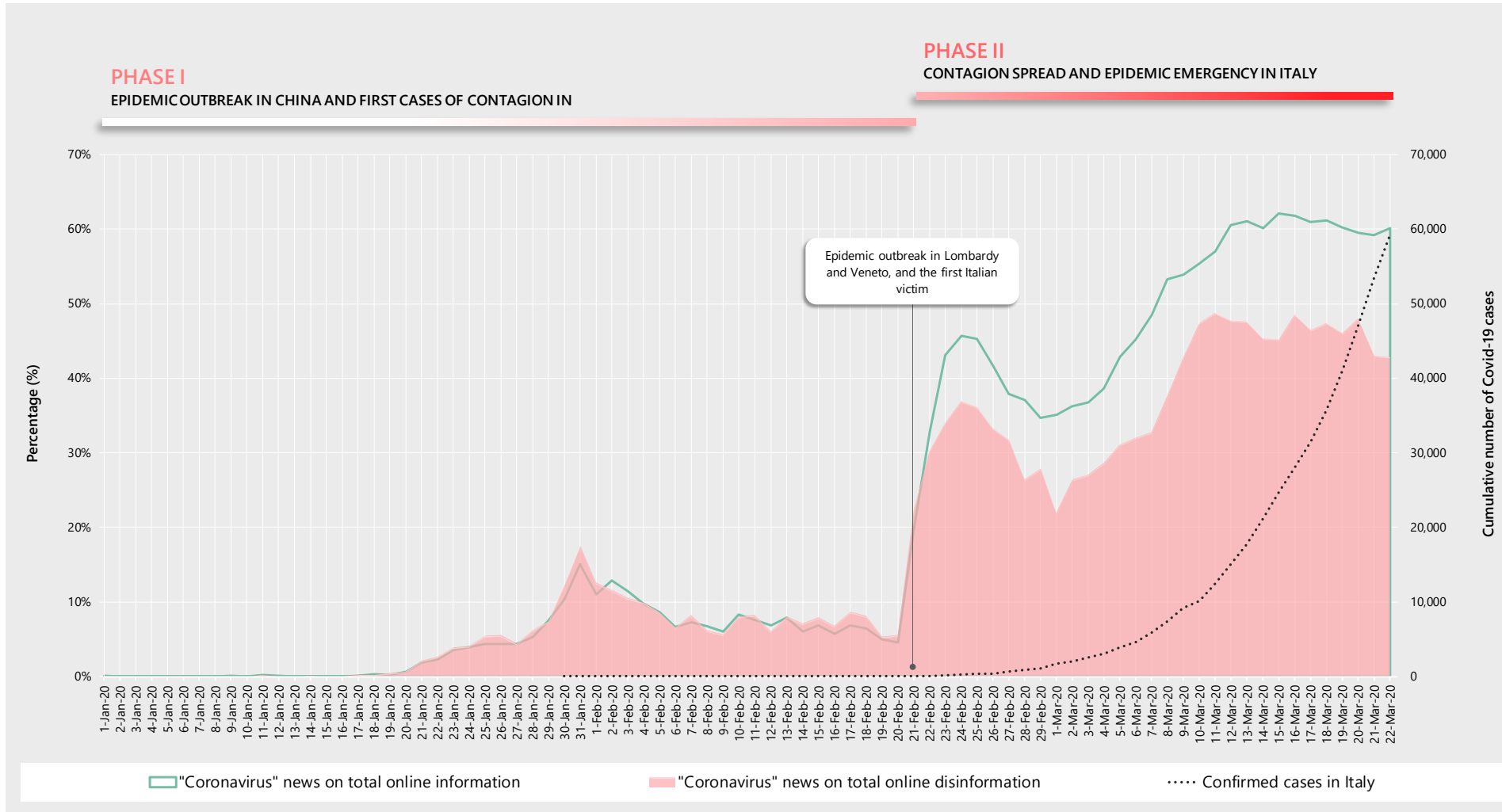
In the last 2 weeks, the daily average is around **60%**



In comparison with the previous period, during the second phase of the epidemic, the number of news on the coronavirus produced in an average day has increased by **12 times**, both for **websites** and for **pages and news-related social accounts**

1.4 Online disinformation: coverage of the coronavirus

Daily incidence of news on the coronavirus on total online disinformation: comparison with online information



NEWS ON THE CORONAVIRUS IN AN AVERAGE DAY

5% **PHASE I**
of the total disinformation JAN, 1 – FEB, 20

38% **PHASE II**
of the total disinformation FEB, 21 – MAR, 22

In the last 2 weeks, the daily average is around **46%**

In an average day of the PHASE II, the **articles** regarding the coronavirus from disinformation sources increased (in comparison with Phase I) by **8 times**, **posts/tweets** by **10 times**

In Phase I, the coronavirus coverage is on average higher for sources of disinformation than for information sources. In **Phase II**, the trend reverses as a result of the **greater growth of information**

1.5 Social network: posts and tweets on the coronavirus

Incidence of posts/tweets concerning the coronavirus on the total, by type of social source (% in an average day of the week)



POSTS/TWEETS ON THE
CORONAVIRUS IN AN AVERAGE
DAY

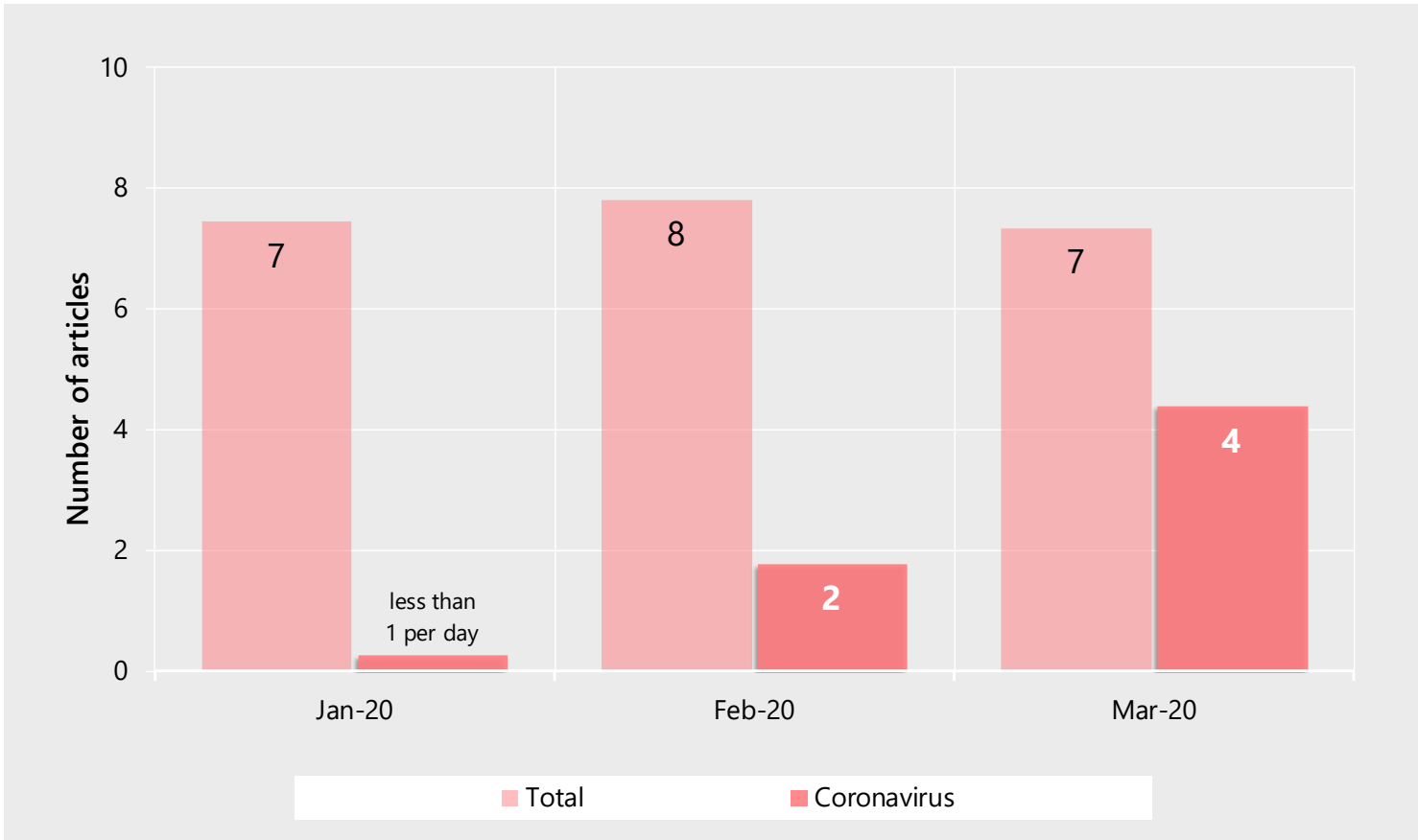
45% MARCH,
16-22
of the total
information
sources

36% MARCH,
16-22
of the total
disinformation
sources

Both for the social sources of information and for those of disinformation, there is a **marked growth trend** in the space attributed to the epidemic. From the end of January to March 22nd the weight on the total number of posts/tweets concerning the coronavirus increases by 37 p.p. for **information** sources and 28 p.p. for sources of **disinformation**

Note: the figures indicated refer to the posts and tweets published by the pages and social accounts (Facebook and Twitter) of the sources of information and sources of disinformation identified as such by independent debunking organizations. Therefore, they do not include users' posts/tweets

Articles on the coronavirus produced in an average day by each disinformation website



Note: the figures indicated refer to the articles published by the disinformation websites identified as such by independent debunking organizations

In the first 3 months of 2020, a disinformation website published an average of **7-8** articles per day referring to **news of any kind**

ARTICLES ON THE CORONAVIRUS PUBLISHED PER DAY BY A DISINFORMATION WEBSITE

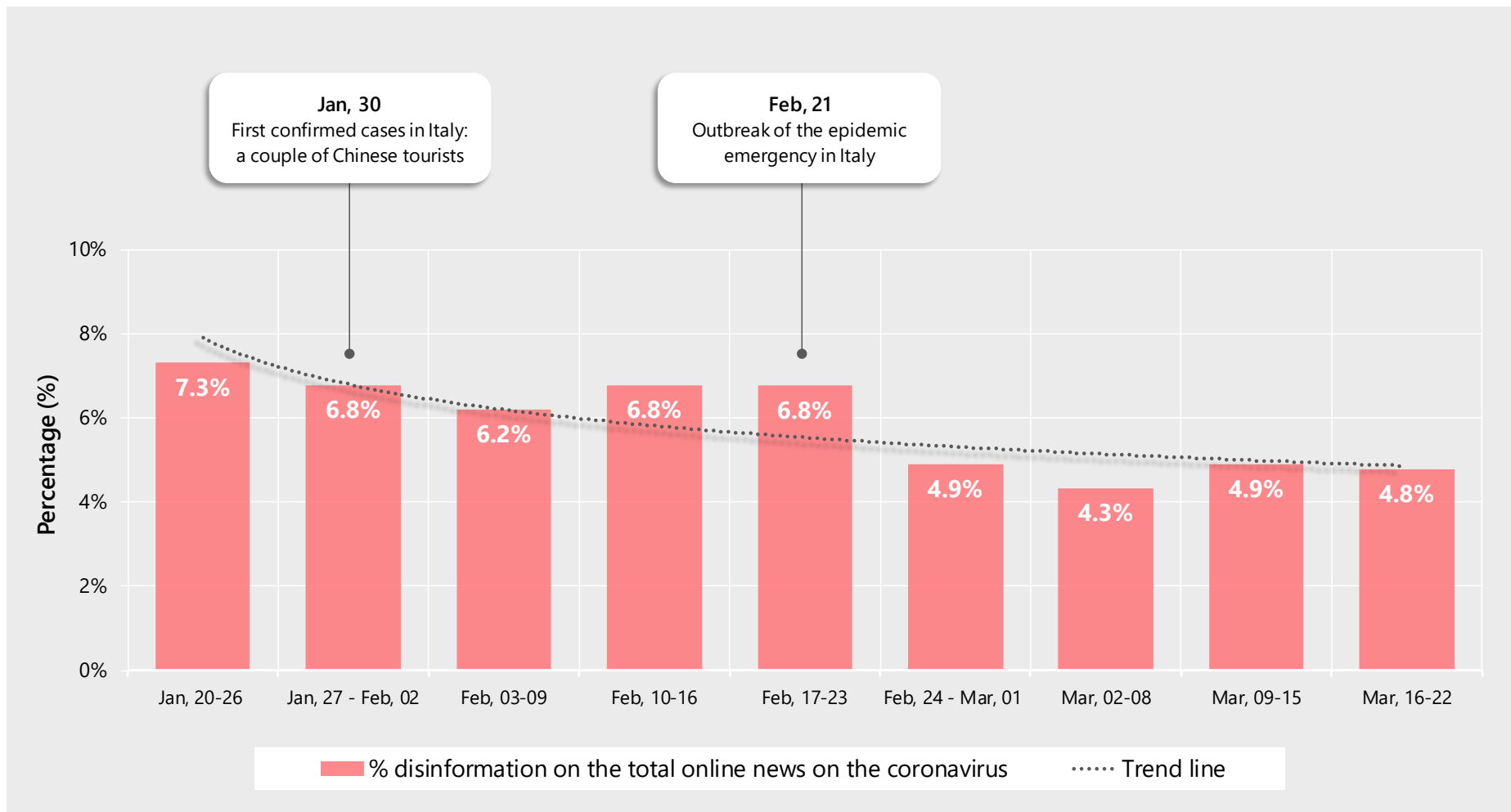
4 MARCH
on a total of 7

In parallel with the increasing seriousness of the Italian situation, the **number of articles on the coronavirus produced by disinformation websites in an average day increases**. From January to February, it shifts from less than one article per day to 2, up to double in number in March

Disinformation websites typically play **a role of impulse** to fake news. Once these are triggered, they are likely to **viralization** through social networks, and other online platforms

1.7 Incidence of disinformation on total online news on the coronavirus

Disinformation on the total online news regarding the coronavirus (% in an average day of the week)



With the epidemic becoming increasingly severe in Italy, the incidence of disinformation on the total "coronavirus" news produced by online sources, in an average day, shows a lowering trend

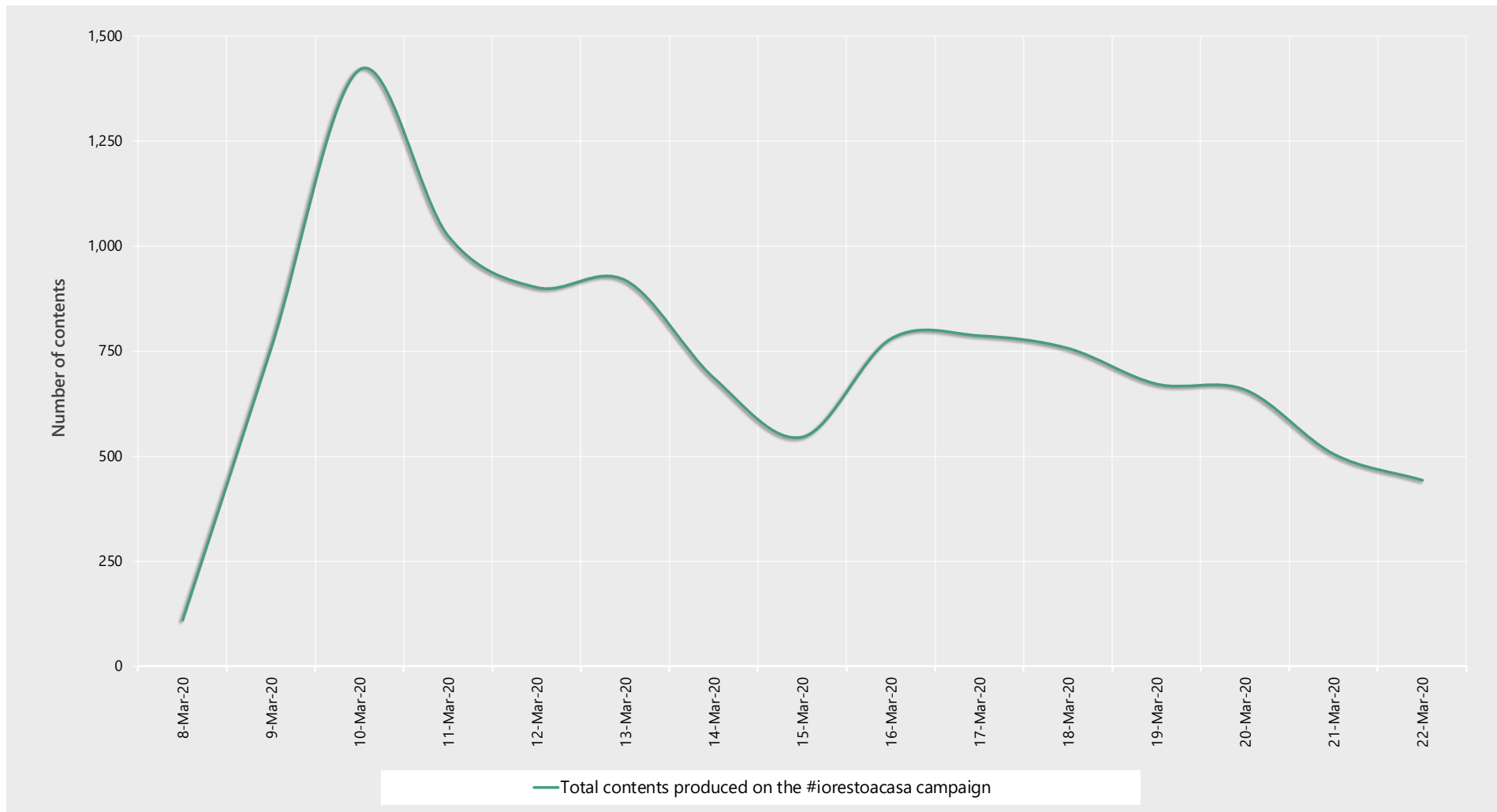
DISINFORMATION INCIDENCE IN AN AVERAGE DAY

4.8% MARCH, 16-22
of the total "coronavirus" online news

In the last four weeks of the study, the more online information content on the coronavirus, the less incidence of disinformation that drops to 5%. In the previous weeks, it stood between 6% and 7%

1.8 Media circulation of the #iorestoacasa campaign

Media contents produced daily on the #iorestoacasa campaign



#iorestoacasa is the social campaign jointly promoted by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Health and Civil Protection in order to raise awareness among citizens on the need to avoid moving from home to contain the coronavirus epidemic

CONTENTS PRODUCED ON THE #IORESTOACASA CAMPAIGN IN THE NEWS SYSTEM

11,000 MARCH,
in total 8-22

Many users have joined the initiative, relaunching the campaign hashtag on their social profiles. But it was the entire **information system** that joined the dissemination of the message. On average, from 8 to 22 March, TV, radio, newspapers, websites, pages and social media accounts of the news sources reported the campaign or reiterated the warning in **more than 700** contents per day

The top 10 fake news circulated in Italy regarding the Covid-19 epidemic

For fact-checking, acknowledgments go to Open and Pagella Politica

BILL GATES PROFECY ON THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



FALSE

Bill Gates had never predicted anything regarding the Covid-19 outbreak during its 2015 speech

IBUPROFEN WORSENS COVID-19 DISEASE



FALSE

There is no scientific evidence of the correlation between ibuprofen and the worsening of the disease

PENSIONS CUT BY 50%



FALSE

Fake the INPS guidelines which provides for a 50% reduction in pensions in April due to the emergency

VITAMIN C FAVOURS HEALING FROM COVID-19



FALSE

There is no medical report which states that Vitamic C favours healing from Covid-19

THE AUDIO ON THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES



FALSE

Fake the Whatsapp audio of an Italian stuck in China which exposes all conspiracy theories

THE PHOTOS OF THE MANY COFFINS LINED UP IN BERGAMO



FALSE

The photo of the many coffins in a row was not taken in Bergamo in March 2020 but in Lampedusa in 2013

HIDDEN GOVERNMENT RESOLUTION ON THE STATE OF EMERGENCY



FALSE

The resolution which has declared the state of emergency in Italy was widely known and discussed by all media

DRINK MORE WATER TO 'WIPE OUT' THE VIRUS



FALSE

Drinking water every 15 minutes does not prevent being infected by the virus

THE 2015 TGR LEONARDO SERVICE ON THE VIRUS CREATED IN THE LABORATORY



MISLEADING

The TV report was not about Covid-19. It was shared and spread to induce a belief that the virus has been created in a Lab

SALARIES REDUCED FOR THE HIGHEST OFFICES OF THE STATE



FALSE

There is no decree which cuts the salaries of the highest offices of the State because of the emergency

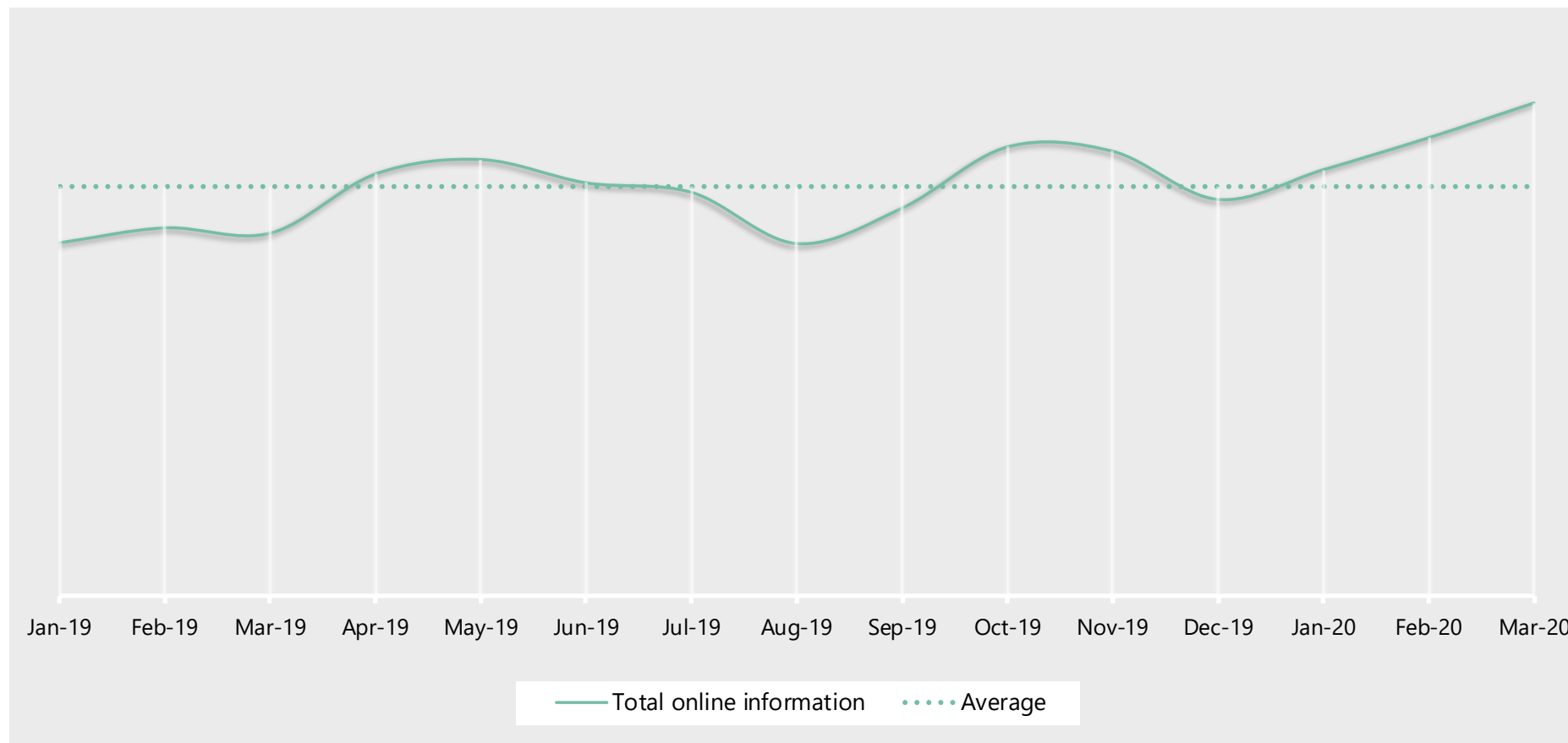


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ONLINE INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN ITALY

2.1 Online information production in Italy

Total news produced by information sources in an average day of the month



In the first quarter of 2020, **online information** produced by websites, web pages and social accounts **has increased overall**

ONLINE INFORMATION PRODUCTION

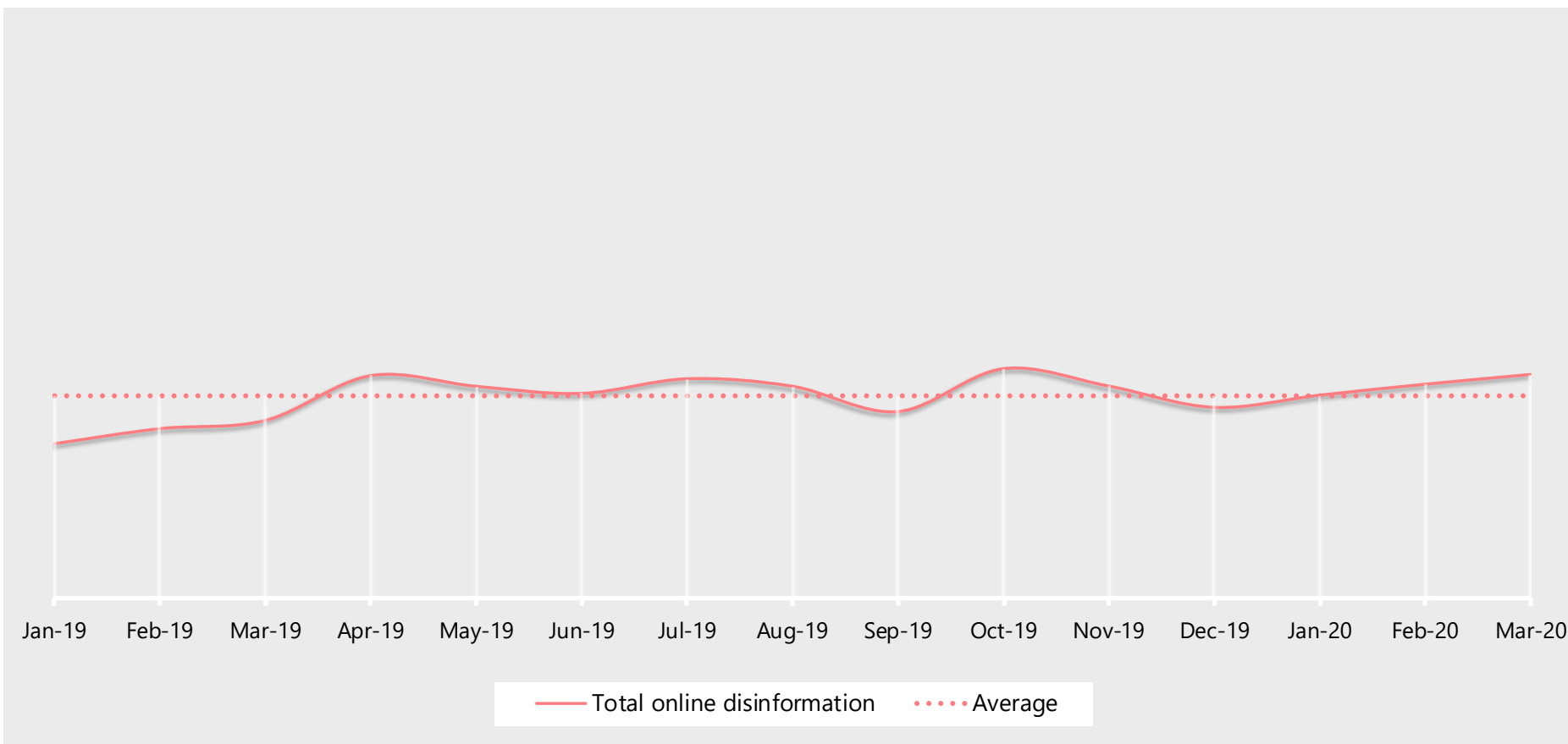
+8% **MARCH 2020**
in comparison with February

The growth rate of online information in March is higher than that registered in **January** and **February** (+7% for each month)

In January, February and March, the figures are **above average** and higher than those of the first quarter of 2019

 [Go to the "coronavirus" section](#)

Total news produced by disinformation sources in an average day of the month



In the first quarter of 2020, the total news produced by **disinformation** websites, pages and social accounts shows an **increasing trend**

DISINFORMATION PRODUCTION

+5% **MARCH 2020**
in comparison with February

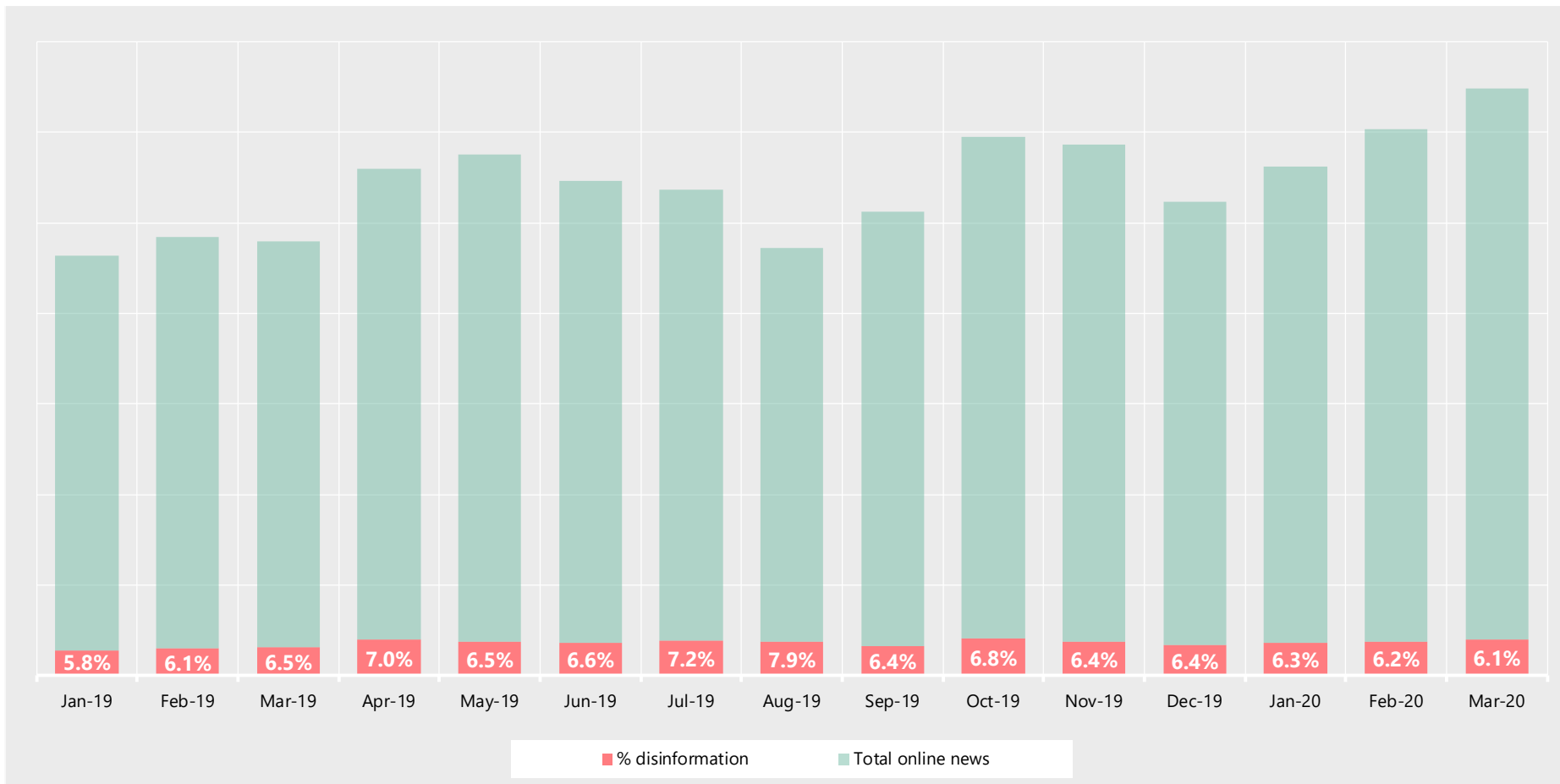
Online disinformation was already increasing in **January (+6%)** and **February (+5%)**. Nevertheless, **online disinformation increases less than online information**

The figures in the first months of the year are **slightly higher than the average**, but clearly higher than in the first semester of 2019

[Go to the "coronavirus" section](#)

2.3 Incidence of disinformation on the overall online news

Disinformation on the overall news produced (% in an average day of the month)



In each of the 3 months of 2020, as the overall number of online news produced increases, there is a **slight decrease in the incidence of disinformation**

DISINFORMATION INCIDENCE IN AN AVERAGE DAY

6.1% MARCH 2020
of the total

In the first quarter of 2020, the **percentage of disinformation** on the total of contents published on the web is **lower than the average of the entire period considered (6.5%)**

 [Go to the "coronavirus" section](#)

COMPOSIZIONE DEL DATABASE

If not differently stated, the figures reported in this document are the result of AGCOM elaborations carried out on a database built from data extrapolated through the platform developed by *Volocom Technology*.

More specifically, the analyzes were conducted on the entire textual content extrapolated from more than **17 million documents** created in Italy (from the **1st of January 2019 up to the 22nd of March 2020**) by **more than 2,000 information sources** (national television and radio channels, newspapers, news agencies, websites of traditional publishers, native online news outlets, and related pages and accounts of social networks), and **sources of disinformation** (websites and social pages/accounts) identified as such by external subjects specialized in debunking activities. The amount of online disinformation produced in Italy was therefore estimated using a subjective methodology, i.e. considering the total number of documents created monthly by the aforementioned sources of disinformation.

The database is composed by the entire textual content of all documents produced during a day by every information and disinformation source. With document, we mean the entire article, in the case of newspapers and websites; the transcription of a transmission segment; in the case of Tv and radio; all tweets/posts in the case of online platforms.

SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTS

Further studies and updates on the AGCOM initiatives regarding online disinformation and the Covid-19 epidemic are available in a dedicated area of the AGCOM website: [Tavolo piattaforme digitali e Big data – Emergenza Covid-19](#), and in the related pages [Covid-19 per gli utenti](#) and [Fact-checking](#)

A more detailed description of the methodology is presented in the AGCOM Report (2018), [News vs. fake in the information system](#)

More in-depth analysis on the definitions and technical dimensions of online disinformation are in the AGCOM Report (2018), [Online disinformation strategies and the fake content supply chain](#), conducted within the [Roundtable on pluralism and online platforms](#)

The AGCOM policy recommendations and action plan on the online news system have been recently published in the [document](#) closing the [Sector Inquiry on digital platforms and the online information system](#) (2020)

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