

DISINFORMATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Elena Laura DOBRE¹, Geanin Georgian JURUBIȚĂ¹, Georgiana MOICEANU¹, Ionut Marius CROITORU¹

¹National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9797-2070>

¹Email: laura.dobre@upb.ro

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5330-1519>

¹Email: geanin.jurubita@upb.ro

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9483-0894>

¹Email: georgiana.moiceanu@upb.ro

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1290-6394>

¹Email: ionut.croitoru@upb.ro

Abstract

The main objective of this article is to identify ways to combat misinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania. During the period analysed, there was a plethora of articles, a large volume of information from dubious sources, and communications from institutions that changed from one day to the next. This new context for contemporary society favoured the appearance of fake news. Thus, in this paper we have analyzed number of solutions for identifying misinformation and for a more accurate validation of information from the media. Combating misinformation is part of the modern challenges of society as the level of digitisation has increased and online and social media platforms are often the only source of information for the 21st century citizen. In conclusion, if a century ago disinformation was presented in a certain form, today it is in a continuous metamorphosis according to technological evolution.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, fake news, mass-media, misinformation, online

INTRODUCTION

Before going deeper into the chosen topic, it is necessary to define the notion of disinformation and what it represents from the point of view of communication specialists. In the latest report at European level, experts proposed the following definition of disinformation: "a series of verifiably false or misleading information" which is, cumulatively, (a) "created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or for the purpose of deliberately misleading the public" and (b) "likely to cause public harm"[1]. The specialists' explanation highlights the intentionality of the source transmitting the information to the media. There are individuals or groups who have an intrinsic, deliberate interest with the ultimate aim of influencing public opinion, society or citizens exposed to articles in the online or offline media.

Disinformation is not a new element in history and is a common tool in political or economic environments. The spread of disinformation was a widespread phenomenon in the Roman Empire, especially in Rome, which was called the City of Conspiracies. One of the earliest examples of fake news dates back to the political conflict between Emperor Octavian and the Roman general Mark Antony. A much better politician than his opponents, Octavian issued a series of forged documents showing his affinity for Egyptian interests at the expense of the Roman Empire. Upon learning of this, the Roman Senate changed its political decision on the appointment of an emperor, causing Antony to flee to Egypt, becoming a mere mortal without the military leadership he had until the conflict. Political, economic or social crises provide a favourable environment for the creation and spread of false news. The information density and population density of cities and metropolitan areas are key characteristics for the effectiveness of this kind of news. Information is more manageable in small communities compared to large communities, where information is verified through a more complex process or not verified at all. Discussing the topic of impact, fake news may be overlooked today, but in ancient Rome the means of democracy operated on different value systems and principles[2].

Disinformation is part of a very wide range of communication practices or strategies whose main objective is to change public perceptions at the mass level. References to this concept have become the leitmotif of the contradiction between truth and lies. Using this tool as a way out of sensitive situations makes it more applicable in a post-truth society, offering new insights into the role models of 21st century politicians or public figures facing new trends and a regularly updated digital environment. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an easy environment for the emergence in various forms of disinformation.

Coronavirus is a virus discovered in 2019 that is part of the collection of coronaviruses that cause COVID-19. It causes certain diseases in animals and humans, with severe symptoms in vulnerable individuals. It presents as a severe respiratory infection, ranging from simple colds and coughs to illnesses such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). In December (2019), the first outbreak of COVID-19 was recorded in Wuhan, China. However, while in the early months only Asia, particularly China, had a rapid escalation in the number of cases, it was only the beginning of a global pandemic, and the virus spread rapidly across continents becoming an international crisis[3].

A key factor that led to the choice of this topic was the complexity and scale of the situation, making the COVID-19 phenomenon the biggest international and national crisis in decades. From another perspective, the pandemic had a huge impact not only on Romania but also on the European health system with effects that are still being felt after almost three years. Figure 1 shows the increase in the number of cases in Romania until 14.11.2022 when the Romanian Digitisation Authority decided to stop statistics after the lifting of the alert status[4].

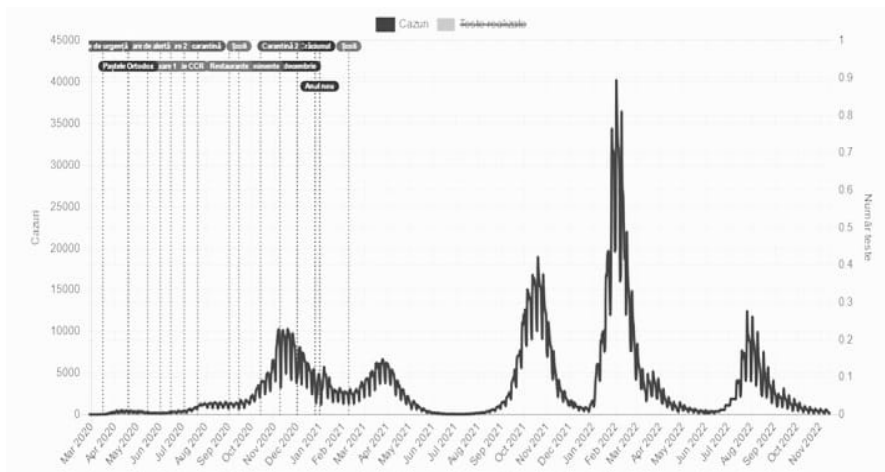


Figure 1: Coronavirus in Romania [4]

EXPERIMENTAL

The bibliographical analysis was the basis of the article with information processed from academic sources and online. Academic and online sources, together with health professionals, are a key factor in understanding and formulating terminology as accurately as possible and creating the most precise framework. As things stand, the official WHO (World Health Organisation) website is the world's main trusted source of real-time information. For this reason, we have used this source throughout the paper. A second category is the institutions and individuals responsible for health. At the national level, communication during the pandemic was carried out by representatives from the Ministry of Health, the DSU, and the Strategic Communication Group that was created at the government level. Related to the analysis done, the search was done based on articles published by journalists and scientific researchers. The scientific journals were found in the Google Scholar database and selected if they contained keywords such as COVID-19 pandemic, fake news, mass media, and misinformation. In this respect, the information that best suited were put in the next date presented in the results and discussions section. Considering all this the paper presents clear information related to the misinformation and the validation of information from the media. Combating misinformation is part of the modern challenges of society as the level of digitisation has increased and online and social media platforms are often the only source of information for the 21st century citizen.

RESULTS

Public misinformation increased significantly at the beginning of the pandemic against a background of widespread uncertainty, shaping a unique crisis in contemporary society. The high level of information, both domestically (Romania) and internationally, contributed to the increase in misinformation. In the Romanian area we are mainly

facing disinformation from Russia with nuances that have been limited by closing down certain websites. If during the pandemic information was difficult to filter because of the lack of experience of a similar situation, after the start of the war in Ukraine things became very serious and Russian websites were banned both nationally and internationally.

In an article on the news website digi24.ro, the author points out some of the ingredients that can be identified in connection with supporting false information or certain conspiracy theories. Thus, three specific types of disinformation are identified at very difficult boundaries: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation [5]. Misinformation is false information whose main purpose is not to cause visible harm. This category includes information that unintentionally and unwittingly penetrates public opinion and spreads without a well-defined purpose. Another form is disinformation, which aims to create and publish messages that intentionally discredit an individual, social group, political party, organisation or country. Of the three, it is ubiquitous in the public and has a very strong and visible impact on all categories of users. Malinformation is the latest form of disinformation, as it is often based on real-world information that is very difficult to verify. The concept of intent exists, but powerful institutions and Returning to the subject of the article, we will address three topics of discussion about COVID-19 proposed in an online material that has as its main element misinformation and fake news signed by specialist. The first topic is based on the idea of intentional creation of the virus. The basic idea reveals the motives of interest groups spreading this virus in different countries. The most common culprits are the United States of America or China, but there are also some news reports attributing the role of initiator and creator to Israel.

In general, they are launched for different purposes: an economic crisis with the aim of slowing down the ageing of the modern population, with the aim of imposing a new world order, or with the aim of starting a new world. Both have problems with the level of public information, but the intention is different. However, the degree of verification of information is almost zero, because there are no real facts or reliable sources at all, everything is based on emotion. The second point is about a miracle cure becoming the antidote and a heightened guilt of Big Pharma imposing mandatory vaccination. In Romania the idea of bicarbonate with added vitamin C, lemon or vinegar has emerged. All of these gained notoriety through social media and messaging apps massively distributed by fake accounts or non-health people. There have also been fake news stories accusing pharmaceutical companies of hiding certain cheap drugs for profit. Thirdly, it is all based on the idea that it is all a conspiracy to force vaccination on all individuals or that it is all aimed at destroying traditional families and traditional beliefs. All these theories have not been verified until today and have remained a chimera in the collective mind, but one that has unnerved the population at key moments[7].

In times of health, economic or social crisis, it is advisable to follow official sources that have an institutional basis. Most news sites already have an established reputation, which is the eligibility criterion. An example of "so yes" is the recommended website stirioficiale.ro, which provides specific and accurate information from official sources, a specific example: "Press release on the return to the country of 620 Romanian citizens taken from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs without any intervention of the publication[8]." However during the pandemic period there were various websites that tried to alter the truth and data by outlining a false reality. In Romania, the only authority that regulates and can take the decision to close a website is the National Authority for Administration and Regulation of Communications (ANCOM) based on a government decree. During the state of emergency in Romania, 15 websites were shut down at the request of the Ministry of Interior for publishing news that repeatedly misinformed the public. This had little effect, as most of the websites were moved under different domains or names in order to continue spreading dubious news and create a state of widespread panic. Combating disinformation is a challenge both at national level and for the European Union. That is why we have identified three elements that can combat this phenomenon, as well as fake news that can be applied to any information coming from online or offline.

The credibility of a source is essential because it conveys certainty or uncertainty in an individual's mind. This is constructive because reliable sources can almost always provide accurate and unbiased information. In order to ascertain the authenticity of online sources that publish various information in the most meaningful way possible, certain criteria must be met: the name of the internet domain used, whether it is a paid domain or termination. Another criterion is the imitation of well-known online publications such as the main page mediafax.ro, the illegal page mediafax.com.co. Another category is online media that publish information in the public space. Visit the organisation's website in person to see the various articles. For this reason, you should examine the "About Us" column, which describes the organisation's values, mission and history. The absence of this category should be noted, as it is an integral part of any professional website[9].

The website justitiarul.ro provides an eloquent example to best illustrate the above example. At first glance, the site lacks the About Us, History or Contact sections. Most of the articles highlight warning headlines with a tinge of clickbait. Another thing that highlights the obscure way of doing press online is evident in the main elements that are prominently displayed on the front page, as follows: a suggestive image of Vlad Tspeş which is a mostly

misinterpreted symbol, certain slogans emblazoned in bold "Truth over fear or A magazine of attitudes against corruption and abuse"[10].

On 23 April 2020, the Ministry of the Interior publicly called for the closure of this website and submitted a request to ANCOM. The Strategic Communications Group reported a large amount of misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, which was widely disseminated through various articles. The punishment was short-lived, as on 30 April, a week after the site was closed, the reopening of the site was negotiated, but with certain terms: removal of articles containing false elements related to the pandemic, public assumptions of the site's identity with a clear breakdown of the contracting authorities controlling all published content, and the following articles to display authoritative sources of information.

Photo/video manipulation is the latest form of misinformation, as text has given way to images in this digitised society and emotion is different with visual content. Instagram has emerged as a powerful alternative to the social network Facebook, which is controlled by the same body. Users with less and less time are being manipulated into the visual age on various social media platforms. For this reason, more attention should be paid to older photo/video material used in current articles. From a technical point of view, a viable solution are fact-checking sites. This is a special identification tool, so it helps to verify the illustration and date it. This form of image misrepresentation has been used since the advent of cameras until today. World War II and the Cold War era reinforced this type of manipulation of society's image.

During the period of the state of emergency, various false information messages appeared using images or video content. A concrete example that has gone viral online in Romania is a truck full of dead bodies and a macabre image that illustrates this. The news along with the picture was published on a website called antenaneews.xyz but heavily promoted on social media with an explicit picture and alarming headlines. After a check, we can see that the publication is of Russian origin but no other eloquent details are given. The article is distributed with the following headline "A TRUCK FULL OF FALLS WAS STOPPED TODAY IN THE CAPITAL! 250 PEOPLE PRESUMED TO HAVE DIED OF COVING"[11], this is a first alarm signal by the violence of the message.

But the most powerful element is the image which, after an internet search, reveals a picture that comes from 2018, the city of Guadalajara, Mexico. In this case the response from the authorities was swift and they debunked the article in a statement signed by the Strategic Communications Group. In the vast majority of cases, this type of content is not assumed by credible institutions or personalities, but there have been such cases. In 2018, the Russian Embassy in Bucharest published a picture of a Russian officer holding a single watch, although in the original picture he is holding two (Figure 2), this retouching of the image was identified with the help of historian who publicly presented the original picture[12].



Figure 2: Original image, Retouched image [12]

The author of the article is an essential index of credibility for any information written or published online. Lack of authorship by an author or institution indicates a high degree of vulnerability for the proposed text. The degree of scepticism must be high because anonymising an opinion denotes intentionality. Another important benchmark is the full validation of the author through their history or biography, for example whether there are any other articles or posts by that person on that site or on the internet. Another element that should attract our attention is a high frequency of articles on the same day, or on the same topic of debate. A relevant example is the breackingnews.xyz website, which from the very first interaction should alert us to certain uncertainties. The articles presented on the site did not have an author or there were cases where only the first name was specified, a clear indication that things are not genuine. The tool used was largely clickbait, with shocking headlines and colloquial expressions about the health system.

These tools presented are just a part of the mechanisms that can help us in combating misinformation and recognizing the phenomenon of fake news. Each citizen relates differently to a piece of information, but it is essential to see the simple picture in order to create as accurate a reality as possible [13].

DISCUSSION

The topic chosen in this article is quite complex, which is why there have been some limitations because some things have not yet been analysed at a mass level. The pandemic has completed its first act, but continues in other forms and for this reason the subject is still not very well defined by specialist authors. The novelty of the work lies in the way disinformation has become a major element in the sphere of communication in a time of crisis. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic represents a unique occurrence in the modern age of technology. While previous pandemics have also impacted millions, the continuous media attention on COVID-19 has elevated this crisis to the forefront of our collective consciousness. Misinformation wields a potent and destructive influence in this era of global communication, where a single false idea can swiftly disseminate to numerous susceptible audiences. [14] The first category is disinformation, deliberately propagated by individuals with malicious intent. In the context of COVID-19, disinformation has wrongly attributed the spread of the virus to racial groups, illegal immigrants, and even governments. Fake news gains traction due to its ease of dissemination in the realm of online sharing. When we share information on the internet, our scrutiny tends to be minimal. Additionally, there is a tendency to share negative news, and a significant portion of COVID-19-related information falls into this category. [15]

Furthermore, in the article [16], it is demonstrated that a notable portion of the public often categorizes numerous concerning news articles as untrue. Robust political affiliations may at times lead individuals to deem information conflicting with their beliefs as false, but adhering to impartiality standards can alleviate the adverse effects of partisanship. Moreover, there exists a significant correlation between the scope of disinformation assessment and the perceived impact and gravity of misinformation, along with an endorsement for legislative actions, especially concerning misinformation with an antagonistic stance towards the government [16].

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has evolved into a breeding ground for misinformation. Addressing this infodemic necessitates not only scientific oversight but also a deeper comprehension among practitioners involved in crisis management. It is imperative to establish robust mechanisms for disseminating accurate information, fostering media literacy, and promoting responsible online behavior. Moreover, collaborative efforts between public health authorities, tech platforms, and the general public are essential to curb the spread of misinformation and ensure a more informed and resilient society during public health crises[17].

Misleading information stands out as an escalating cyber risk, encompassing misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. The advent of digital transformation and the ongoing impact of COVID-19 have only heightened its prevalence. While considerable attention has been dedicated to exploring the ramifications of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news on the political landscape, the effects of misleading information on businesses have received comparatively less scrutiny, arguably insufficient examination. It is imperative to recognize and address the potential threats posed by misleading information to businesses, as it can significantly impact reputation, consumer trust, and overall operational resilience. Proactive measures, including robust cybersecurity strategies and heightened media literacy within the business community, are essential to navigate and mitigate these risks effectively.[18]The proposed guide could be improved with another relatively new element. Feedback is an index that until the beginning of the pandemic was not restricted to the online environment. Nowadays, any article or post on social media can be censored if desired by disabling comments or feedback. Social networks are a stronger filter, where you can review any comment before it is published, which is beneficial in some ways, but can also help people with less good intentions. Comments usually highlight lesser known nuances or references to certain sources.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, misinformation is a present element in Romanian society and it is a challenge for future generations to innovate tools to combat it. It is worth remembering the distinction between manipulation and exposure to an advertisement online or on social networks. While certain concepts in the field of communication are only applicable in certain spheres, misinformation is ubiquitous in all fields of activity with effects that can destabilize entire communities.

The need for theoretical notions of communication creates a powerful filter through which information is assimilated by individual citizens. The tools we propose must be tailored to the specifics of each area of interest where fake news or behavior revealing manipulation at any level can be found. The collective mind is the sum of the experiences that society goes through and how it relates to difficult moments. The chosen topic summarises, in the main, a global pandemic with the new challenges of the digital society in which we find ourselves.

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Corresponding author:

Elena Laura Dobre, Title: Student.

Full address: Spl. Independentei nr 313, Bucharest District 6

Email: laura.dobre@upb.ro