DISINFORMATION DURING THE CORNAVIRUS PANDEMIC. AN ANALYSIS OF THE TYPES OF FAKE NEWS IN FOUR STATES

Georgiana Camelia STĂNESCU
University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract

Disinformation is currently a real globally danger, and during the coronavirus pandemic it has reached alarming levels in the European Union and beyond. Studies in the field show that, in the first six months after the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, false information was distributed through millions of false accounts on social networks, but also on messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. This paper analyzes, through the qualitative and quantitative method, the types of false news topics that have been published on various obscure sites and then distributed on social networks or messaging platforms. The analysis is made in three countries of the European Union (Romania, Italy and France) and in Russia, and news examples were selected from highly trusted fact-checking platforms, such as the one developed by the European Commission. The research highlights the extremely similarity between the news broadcast in the European Union and reflects the message differences of the fake materials distributed in Russia.

Introduction

If the power was held in the past by the one who had access to information, now the power is held by the one who knows how to manage the information. (Pulido et al, 2020). The emergence of the Internet and, implicitly, of social networks have facilitated the circulation of news, opening up the possibilities of communication (Del Vicario et al., 2016). But today, many online sites and social networks have become intensively used platforms for spreading false and misleading information (Lazer et al., 2018). And misinformation threatens the proper functioning of states and even democracy itself through the short, medium, and long-term impact it can have on citizens. Misinformation erodes trust in institutions and digital or traditional media and harms our democracies by preventing citizens from making informed decisions. Thus, changes in the media ecosystem "raise new concerns about the vulnerability of democratic societies to false news and the limited capacity of the public to contain them." (Lazer et al., 2017). It can polarize debates, create or intensify tensions in society, undermine electoral systems and have a wider impact on European security. Disinformation affects freedom of opinion and expression, a fundamental right enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The problem has become so serious that the subject is high on the agenda of world leaders. In the fight against false news, the governments of many states are looking for strategic solutions to stop this phenomenon. And this phenomenon has seen astonishing proportions since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has announced that humanity is already facing an "infodemia" in addition to the virus and the disease caused by the virus. Specifically, just like the virus, a wave of fake news is spreading

around the world, and a lot of information is being used as a way to exert political influence. (World Health Organization, 2020)

In the European Union, the Council and the Commission have addressed this issue in terms of priorities. Furthermore, an EU action plan has been developed to combat Covid-19 misinformation (European Council, 2020). In fact, attempts are being made on all levels to counteract this growing phenomenon. A comprehensive report by the EEAS European External Action Task Force has uncovered hundreds of cases of coronavirus misinformation. Between January the 22nd and March the 19th, 2020, 110 false news items of Russian origin about coronavirus were identified. "The authors and the messages are always the same and have a long tradition in the Russian system of influence abroad." (European Commission, 2020)

The number is high comparing to the same period last year, and the danger is even greater as disinformation campaigns become more sophisticated and develop without sufficient regulation, and self-regulation of social platforms is no longer enough.

Internally, the fight against fake news is present in the National Strategy for National Defense 2015-2020, approved by Decision no. 33/2015 of the Romanian Parliament, where it is mentioned in the defense directorates including "the development of the necessary capabilities to react in case of asymmetric and hybrid threats (misinformation being integrated in this concept). (Parliament of Romania, 2019)

False news topics in Romania

In Romania, even before the Covid-19 epidemic broke out, social networks were already loaded with phase information. The first widespread topic was related to vaccines and the occult powers of the global level, which would be of interest for this virus to reach apocalyptic proportions and then a miracle treatment to be sold on a large scale. (News Guard, 2020). In the

foreground was the billionaire Bill Gates, who was allegedly forcibly removed by 1000 policemen from a secret place where he was hiding in Seattle, being accused of biological terrorism. Bill Gates was also the target of another fake news related to the fact that the virus was created in the laboratory and intentionally escaped and then put a vaccine on sale. Obviously the two news, widely spread in Romania, on social networks, turned out to be fake, which have been redistributed countless times. This information was published on obscure sites that appeared overnight in Romania, but which paid for advertising on social networks and the information spread with astonishing speed. But information of this type has greater credibility if someone assumes it, and another fake news related to Covid-19, which also stars Bill Gates around the country and beyond, after being told by a well-known Russian film director, who said that the founder of Microsoft wants to control the world by implanting microchips, and vaccination is a pretext to obtain the biological information of all people. but who paid for advertising on social networks and the information spread with astonishing rapidity. But information of this type has greater credibility if someone assumes it, and another fake news related to Covid-19, which also stars Bill Gates around the country and beyond, after being told by a well-known Russian film director, who said that the founder of Microsoft wants to control the world by implanting microchips, and vaccination is a pretext to obtain the biological information of all people, but who paid for advertising on social networks and the information spread with astonishing rapidity.

All this misinformation reached the public through social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, but with the coronavirus pandemic, a new trend could be observed in the spread of false information in Romania, namely on the WhatsApp platform. In this way, false information was circulated about possible miraculous treatments for the disease caused by Covid-19. For example, the news about the healing power of vitamin C in Romania appears

straightforward "Case 191", on the euvsdisinfo.eu site, a portal of the European Commission built in order to detect the false news coming from the East.

In addition, an audio message from a study conducted by researchers in Vienna has shown that Ibuprofen amplifies the symptoms of Coronavirus disease has been distributed mainly to large WhatsApp groups to create the impression that the authorities are doing a lot, emphasizing that there is actually a real conspiracy against humanity.

Another favorite topic of conspiracy theorists is related to 5G technology, the topic addressed long before the Sars-Cov 2 pandemic. This time the idea was spread that the radiation emitted by 5G technology weakens people's immune system, and this would make them vulnerable. in front of the virus.

Information regarding the measures taken by the authorities at national level has also sparked a wave of fake news. From the idea that the data provided by the authorities are falsified for obscure purposes, especially financial, to the fact that the whole pandemic is a hoax.

Internally, several measures have been taken to limit the distribution of fake news, but not all of them have had the expected result. During the Sars-Cov 2 pandemic censorship was sometimes instituted (Lupu, 2020). For example, one of the measures was to close 15 sites during the state of emergency, but the measure did not prove effective because some publications were reopened and once reopened having a much higher number of views. Many of these sites published articles on conspiracies before the coronavirus pandemic broke out, and now they have done nothing but raise this topic to alarming levels to create panic. In fact, there are currently hundreds of sites that spread millions of posts globally about coronavirus, according to data provided by the European Commission, in the context in which Russia is conducting a disinformation campaign against EU countries, including

Romania. The European Commission has identified, on the basis of a fact checking portal, no less than "110 narratives related to Covid-19, present in over 2,700 fake news articles from sites close to Moscow ".(European Commission, 2020)

The fake news epidemic in Italy

False information has been orchestrated in almost all European Union countries. Italy, one of the countries most severely affected by the Sars Cov 2 virus, was also one of the most affected by the infodemia created around this disease. „The major problems of the moment are how to avoid ourselves, how to fight, how to stop through sociology, psychology and techonology the fake news phenomenon." (Vlăduțescu&Voinea, 2019)

Social networks have been preferred by those who want to spread false information. (Cinelli et al. 2020). Extensive misinformation campaigns took place on the Twitter social network (Kouzy et al., 2020.) Researchers at News Guard conducted a study and analyzed who started the disinformation related to coronavirus in Italy. Thus, they identified 5 fake accounts, from which nine posts went viral and reached about 250,000 followers, who in turn redistributed fake news, so that the information reached about 1 million Twitter users. The focus was on hidden healing methods, such as vitamin C, vitamin D injection or impregnation of the theory that the coronavirus is a big hoax, that it is a simple cold that heals on its own, and cases of death are almost non-existent. And in Italy we find the conspiracy theory related to Bill Gates, vaccine and microchipping to control humanity, and this information was posted and shared hundreds of thousands of times on Twitter by a freelance journalist, who also owns a news site. He also posted false information that the Sars Cov 2 virus was created in the laboratory from an HIV strain. (News Guard, 2020) vaccine and microchipping to control humanity, and this information has been posted and shared hundreds of thousands of times on

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Similar information was posted on Facebook. In addition, distributors of misinformation have gone further and even spread false rumors that the Rome government is preventing migrants from being tested for coronavirus. The information appeared as a result of the falsification of the quotations of Angelo Aliquo, representative of the health authority from the province of Ragusa. The website euvsdisinfo.eu found that in Italy the misinformation also aimed at weakening the institutions of the European Union or NATO. A lot of false news were related to the fact that Russia helped Italy when it needed it, while the partner organizations stayed and did nothing. (Euvsdisinfo, 2020)

But a lot of false information was spread, in Italy, through the WhatsApp platform. The messaging application has become the preferred means of distributing fake news. A lot of information about the dramatic situation in hospitals, but also videos about the fact that the virus was created in the laboratory were distributed mainly in large groups. The influx of false information was so great that Facebook decided to work with a local company Facta to remove the fake content.

Fake news in France

1.2   As early as March 2020, in France, a large-scale campaign to misinform the population about the spread of coronavirus began. Many Facebook and Twitter pages were created for this purpose, and others, already existing, were reprofiled on false information related to COVID-19. (Noufou Ouedraogo, 2020)

News Guard found that out of 7 Twitter accounts, 9 separate information about the coronavirus were distributed, which reached over 251,000 followers, and they, in turn, redistributed the untrue rumors. False

information includes themes from other EU countries, such as the global vaccination campaign launched by businessman Bill Gates, at the initiative of which the virus was created. Another piece of information was related to the fact that the virus was created in the laboratory and intentionally released, then spread around the world for a military game. In France we also find the false rumor that this virus is spread through 5 G technology. The same themes are distributed hundreds of thousands of times on Facebook, and on WhatsApp, the multitude of false messages spread has made it difficult for the authorities. Many medical messages that allegedly came from a doctor spread around France. The message was one that used family language, in which a so-called doctor addressed a friend in a friendly tone and explained what to do to avoid contracting the virus. After France, the message was translated into several languages and circulated in several states of the European Union, being redistributed millions of times. In France we discover another kind of fake, from a Twitter account is distributed a fake interview of the Japanese Nobel Prize winner Honjo Tasuku, who allegedly stated that he does not believe that Sars Cov 2 is a natural virus.

Fake news in Russia

1.3 The member countries of the European Union were nor the only ones invaded by fake news. And in Russia, which is found guilty of throwing false information at the EU, untrue rumors have been spread countless times on social networks. However, the message is a little different from the one launched on social networking sites and pages in the European Union. It is centered on an anti-American current. (Sukhankin, 2020)

For example, on Facebook a news item about the fact that the Covid-19 virus is an American biological weapon used to give birth to a large biological war. Another false news, spread thousands of times on social media was that the Sars Cov 2 virus was thrown by the Americans, on China territory,

in the fight between the two states due to economic reasons. Another conspiracy issue is related to the fact that the mortality rate caused by Covid-19 in Russia is very low due to the fact that Russian citizens have not been vaccinated in the past with influenza serum bought from the West. Also in Russia, it is clear that there is false news with direct attack on the European Union or the United States, and as an example we have a news published in Russia by the site rusvesna.su, then taken over thousands of accounts on social networks, about the fact that the United States is to blame for the outbreak of the pandemic. NATO has also been the target of false news spread across Russia. For example, the website novorosinform.org provided news that NATO is using the CVID-19 pandemic to mobilize Western forces against Russia, obviously false information. The Russians also received information about healing medicines such as ginger or salt, but the frequency of its spread was much lower than in European Union countries - obviously false information. (Euvsdisinfo, 2020)

The Kremlin authorities have decided to take action to spread false news, and those who spread false information, presenting it as true, risk up to five years in prison. Furthermore, the censorship authority decided that 44 sites should remove the content of more articles that presented "false information" related to the COVID-19 pandemic. And this had a positive side on the one hand, but there were no negative effects. For example, a radio station promoting the interests of the Russian opposition interviewed a political analyst, who claimed that the government was lying when it said no one had died in the country from the coronavirus. The president and the interior minister pressured the station to delete the interview from its website. This request was motivated as part of the government's campaign against what the authorities called "fake news", but many saw this as a real censorship of freedom of expression.

Conclusions:

In recent months, the health sector has been overwhelmed by false information - published and distributed intentionally or unknowingly regarding COVID-19. More than 3.4 million suspicious accounts targeting coronavirus discussions have been suspended on Twitter since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, thanks to the EU institutions' collaboration with online platforms. Facebook removed hundreds of accounts from the social network - more than half from Russia, Iran and Georgia - after discovering that they belonged to networks that carried out campaigns to influence followers. However, the message sent to the public was different depending on the countries where the false information was disseminated. In Romania, false news about miracle treatments hidden by the authorities predominated, conspiracy messages related to obscure financial interests and an attempt was made to impose the idea that businessman Bill Gates was behind the Sars Cov pandemic 2. Similar messages were sent in Italy and France, and sometimes the same news was translated into several languages and published on various news sites, so that later, they can be spread on social networks. The WhatsAapp platform was also used to distribute messages in all three countries. They had a family tone to give as much credibility as possible. Instead, the fake messages spread on Russian websites and social networks have a strong anti-American message and a Russian nationalist current. Also, the idea was imposed that important institutions such as NATO or the European Union were weakened during the pandemic, and Russia became an increasingly important international pawn. In fact, the idea that the European Union institutions are weakening has been very present in Italy as well.

In this context, it can be seen that the wave of fake news is increasingly dangerous, and those behind these conspiracy theories are waging a hybrid war targeting more and more states, so the multinational effort to

combat this phenomenon must be increasingly otherwise it risks destabilizing democracy and the rule of law.

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