

THE CORONAVIRUS INFORMATION WAR. HOW IT ALL STARTED

Cosmin PRELIPCEANU

journalist, independent researcher

Abstract: *Analysing the Russian Disinformation War during the Coronavirus Pandemic, we will emphasise on seemingly harmless and “meaningless” nature of the first widely distributed information, mainly through unsourced messages, first on the Internet and then in mainstream media (e.g. television). It began seemingly innocent, with sensible medical advice. It has constantly struck the credibility of the authorities of any kind: medical, administrative, political. It continued in a crescendo with medical advice with potentially lethal effect: swallow substances and drugs! Then, countries like Russia and China encouraged “the blame game” between countries, multinational organizations and between politicians and ordinary people. The fake news campaign has been launched through conspiracy theories, sometimes supported by movies or audio recordings. And finally, it called for civic disobedience in the form of non-compliance with barrier gestures, the most serious form of accelerating the spread of the disease and increasing the number of deaths. The populists – local politicians gave a helping hand and became main disinformation vectors. Finally, we will try find an answer to the troubling matter of credibility. What interests us here is what favors this faith, this uncritical belief, this unwillingness to be led by scientific evidence. It is the mechanism at the heart of post-truth: people feel and don’t reason.*

Keywords: *information war, disinformation, fake news, post-truth, Russia*

Disinformation World War

On the morning of Sunday, March 15, 2020, WhatsApp sent the following alert message:

“Coronavirus (RO)

The new Coronavirus may not show signs of infection for several days.

How do you know if someone is infected?

By the time fever and / or cough set in and the person needs to be treated in the hospital, lungs are already affected, usually with 50% fibrosis, and it is too late.

Taiwanese experts offer a simple self-check that can be done every morning: take a deep breath and hold it for more than 10 seconds. If you do this completely and successfully, without coughing, discomfort, stiffness, or tightness in the mouth, you have proof that there is no fibrosis in the lungs and virtually no infection.

Please check yourself every morning in a clean- air environment.

Excellent advice is also given by Japanese doctors for the treatment of COVID-19: make sure your mouth and throat are never dry. Take a few sips of water every 15 minutes or so. Water or other liquids will wash the virus down your throat. Once there, stomach acid will kill the virus. If you do not drink enough water regularly, the virus can enter the trachea and lungs. It's very dangerous.

Please send this to family and friends.”

Some received the message several times, from different people. By early evening, it had spread on Facebook and Twitter. Ignoring the errors and the bizarre title, millions of people felt compelled to pass it along. In less than 24 hours, the population of Romania became familiar with a seemingly innocuous, apparently competent, serious-sounding text, which recommended a trivial medical maneuver. The feeling of those perusing it, a feeling masterfully induced in a context of societal uncertainty, was that they

were given a friendly tip that the authorities would keep hidden. Later that same evening, on television, the authorities announced quarantine and the next day, March 16th, the president of Romania signed the decree establishing the state of emergency.

A few days later, a message similar to the one that had caused a stir in Romania began circulating in Italy, this time attributed to a Hungarian physician:

“RICEVO ORA DAL DOTTORE UNGARO E TRASMETTO X CONOSCENZA. Il nuovo coronavirus NCP potrebbe non mostrare segni di infezione per molti giorni, prima dei quali non si può sapere se una persona è infetta. Ma nel momento in cui si manifesta la febbre e / o la tosse e si va in ospedale, i polmoni sono di solito già in fibrosi al 50% ed è troppo tardi!

Gli esperti di Taiwan suggeriscono di fare un semplice verifica che possiamo fare da soli ogni mattina: Fai un respiro profondo e trattieni il respiro per più di 10 secondi. Se lo completi con successo senza tossire, senza disagio, senso di oppressione, ecc., ciò dimostra che non vi è fibrosi nei polmoni, indicando sostanzialmente nessuna infezione.

In tempi così critici, fai questo controllo ogni mattina in un ambiente con aria pulita!

Questi sono seri ed eccellenti consigli da parte di medici giapponesi che trattano casi COVID-19. Tutti dovrebbero assicurarsi che la propria bocca e la propria gola siano umide, mai ASCIUTTE. Bevi qualche sorso d'acqua almeno ogni 15 minuti. PERCHÉ? Anche se il virus ti entra in bocca ... l'acqua o altri liquidi lo spazzeranno via attraverso l'esofago e nello stomaco. Una volta nella pancia ... L'acido gastrico dello stomaco ucciderà tutto il virus. Se non bevi abbastanza acqua più regolarmente ... il virus può entrare nelle tue vie aeree e nei polmoni. È molto pericoloso.

Condividi queste informazioni con la famiglia, gli amici e tutti i conoscenti, per solidarietà e senso civico!!!!”

It is apparent that the Italian message is almost identical to the one that circulated in Romania, while the title is different but equally bizarre. The text refers to an “acquaintance X”, credited with passing the message along, and goes on to cite the “critical times” we live in and to urge civic solidarity. It ends, like the Romanian version, with a request to share the content with family, friends and “all acquaintances”.

The globalization of the coronavirus disinformation campaign

Similar messages circulated in France, Germany, Austria, German-speaking Switzerland and the United Kingdom. They spread throughout Europe, looking like drafts not meant to be disseminated as such, and bearing working titles like “Coronavirus (RO)” and “...transmitted by acquaintance X” seemingly conjured-up in a “lab.” “(RO)” stands for “Romania”, which alludes to the existence of other language versions, while the phrase “... transmitted by X” could indicate the need for ulterior replacements of “X” with the names of specific sources. With a name, better yet a known name in the title, the message would have been more credible. It’s just that, apparently, no additional credibility was needed: even in draft form, the message was catchy. The fact that the two titles circulated without any problems could prove that the speed of dissemination exceeded the expectations of those who conceived and executed the campaign. It’s as if that speed caught the campaigners unprepared.

I started with this case because it exemplifies the absolute novelty of the coronavirus disinformation campaign: its global nature. As Jean Tilliac remarks in *La Tribune*⁸⁹, the blatant lies, the masking of facts, the craving for recognition as a positive hero, the rumors, the selection of information to support one version of the story, and the endless repetition of these techniques, i.e. propaganda,

⁸⁹ Jean Tilliac, “Coronavirus: World War I of disinformation”, *La Tribune*, Paris, 08.04.2020

are methods used in the past and therefore no longer a surprise. In the Covid-19 crisis a new stage was reached, in which the bombardment of narratives and counter-narratives “set the entire planet on fire.” Versions of a single message reached hundreds of millions of people in the span of one day. A disturbing finding, which prompted Tilliac’s expression “*World War I of disinformation*”⁹⁰.

During the same mid-March days full of tension and uncertainty, days when the lockdown was already in place, an audio recording began circulating on the social networks. An alleged member of the staff of Romania’s Liberal Party (PNL) was heard telling a friend that Bucharest, the capital, was going to be closed down due to the virus. Notable here was the audio recording, most likely leaked, which made the information more credible. The listener had the feeling that he was privy to confidential information which came directly from the authorities. Again, the idea was to inoculate fear and distrust by intimating that the authorities were hiding something and the situation was far worse than officially admitted.

Fake news, audio-video phase

For almost two months, March and April, audio messages become a common occurrence. In one of these recordings, an alleged doctor, too busy to write, explains to a friend, a woman addressed as “Sweetie”, how to use vitamin C. The recording had no source, the protagonists no names, but the fact that the information came as advice between friends gave the item maximum credibility. The message was spread through the personal pages of tens of thousands of people who, when asked where they got the message gave the standard answer: from a friend. If asked about the speaker, the annoyed response would be: a doctor, isn’t it obvious? An unnamed

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

doctor was giving advice on how dangerous self-administration of vitamin C was spread internationally. The exchange of remarks was audio recorded in several languages, with the same two female voices.

Scrutinizing the information bombardment at the beginning of the pandemic, one cannot avoid the observation that some messages were harmless, most of them, if not all, banal medical advice generally valid, not devoid of interest, and on the level of common sense. These messages had no precise source, so they had to gain the trust of a fearful society. The method was continuity and pace. In retrospect, the harmless messages had another function: they prepared the ground for what was to come: medical advice no longer so harmless, such as drinking concentrated alcohol or chlorine-based substances, followed by conspiracy theories and calls to civic disobedience--don't wear a mask because the virus doesn't exist. The campaign proved to have two basic characteristics: tempo and crescendo. Once a week, sometimes more frequently, the information flood brought new advice, increasingly serious and dangerous, in some cases leading to death.

During that same uncertain March, on the weekend of 22nd-23rd to be precise, Facebook was abuzz with news of a study by the University of Vienna which supposedly identified the dangers of using Ibuprofen in the treatment of Covid-19. Almost simultaneously, WhatsApp accounts were flooded with the same news, in the form of audio messages. In Romania, the news circulated in written form only, for almost half a day. In this instance, however, the target seemed to have been the German-speaking population, since the message recorded two researchers talking about what their colleagues at the University of Vienna had discovered. A few hours later, the same dialogue began to circulate in Slovak. With remarkable promptness, the University of Vienna issued a statement denying the information, describing it as fake news, and warning of the danger of its further distribution. The

damage had been done. The denial did not appear in Romanian, and Google in German recorded an explosion of Ibuprofen and coronavirus searches. Finally, on Sunday, March 23rd, the University of Vienna website crashed due to increased traffic, and a communique exposing the fake news operation was issued.

Russia exposed

In Italy, at the time the country with the worst epidemiological situation after China, there was, in March, news conveyed via film. Two young Italians, faces not visible, are showing their boarding passes for a flight to Moscow. There is an exchange which can be heard quite clearly, in spite of background noise and mic hiss caused by clothes friction. The image is unstable, and little can be distinguished apart from the boarding passes. The first impression is that of witnessing an important event, and the technical flaws lend the sequence a feel of authenticity. It is clear we're dealing with a recording, yet the viewer feels the emotion of an event filmed in difficult conditions, probably in fear of the authorities. We learn, in the end, that the two are going to Moscow because, we're told, there's no Covid-19 in Russia. Why? Because the Russians have a miracle drug, Arbidol, which the European Union -- hence Italy -- boycotts. The two travel to Moscow to bring Arbidol home for family and friends. It's not difficult to understand the effect such a film had on Italians terrified by the explosion of cases in their country.

These were the first images used in the Coronavirus disinformation war and, notably, the first reference to Russian superiority. The idea will return to the forefront in August, thanks to Vladimir Putin, who told the whole world that Russia was the first to get a vaccine against the new coronavirus.

In Romania, Arbidol made the front page as well, not in an anonymous video, but on television. Gigi Becali, owner of a prominent soccer team, said on a sports show, "I don't buy masks

for hospitals anymore because the state takes care of that, but at the urging of Mr. Streinu Cercel's daughter I ordered a medication we don't have: Arbidol. She was very happy that I succeeded, because Arbidol stocks are now depleted. I paid for it and will receive 100,000 doses from Russia"⁹¹.

It happened on television, so why bother with an online campaign? To respond, it's worth noting--and we'll return to this point several times--that these techniques, multifaceted and insidious, are at the heart of disinformation, Tzarist, Soviet or just plain Russian, and cannot be evaluated sequentially. It is difficult to figure out what they're all about by just following each of their components, or offensives, as they are called. In fact, as we will see, the appearance of "nonsense" stems precisely from the incapacity of an ordinary person to keep up with every news update, read everything and filter all the information he comes in contact with. "Nonsense" is part of Russia's disinformation game, "nonsense" covers its own traces. It's difficult if not impossible for the average, detail-focused individual, to get the whole picture.

Back to television. It functions as an enhancer and multiplier of ideas originating on the Internet. The Becali example shows how unverified information found on the internet reaches the mainstream media through personalities turned vectors of information. Months in a row, other messages--don't wear a mask, the virus doesn't exist, citizens must regain their rights--followed the same amplification route. It should be noted that Russia's disinformation campaign grew in intensity at a steady clip, which shows that it was planned. It started with medical advice and then mobilized people to take to the streets against health protection rules and governments accused of staging a "show" in order to gain more power. The multiplication mechanism could not have been effective with the Internet and

⁹¹ "COVID-19. Gigi Becali says «I ordered 100,000 pills from Russia». The drug is not part of the treatment for coronavirus and is not approved in Europe", *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 06.04.2020

television alone. As we have seen in Romania, it was the politicians who took over the cause and mobilized people for civil disobedience.

Enters television

It is not the only mechanism by which, sooner or later, television ends up giving a helping hand to such campaigns. In a desperate search of ratings, therefore relevance, television is in danger of being surpassed by the resonance of the Internet. It is a constant source of concern for major TV newsrooms. Under pressure from the Internet, with its frenzy of rumor and source-less stories, legacy media runs the risk of becoming irrelevant and losing audience. Internet topics are basically more interesting than those on TV. In addition, in a competitive market there will be, sooner or later, players (TV stations) who will play by their own rules, which, if successful, could turn into new norms. We're already seeing this. Every evening, there are TV debates about who wants to get what out of the lockdown. Why? Simply because editors think it responds to public interest and nothing can prevent them from covering topics of such broad interest. It is worth asking if it is ethical to feed people unverified information, rumors, even lies, just because they are interesting. Does a topic become valid, fit to broadcast, just because the public consumes it? Should journalistic rigor be suppressed because people are interested and consume such news stories? Defenders of the concept "give the public what it wants because it knows best", invoke freedom of expression and say that moral intervention in the selection of topics is in fact censorship, denial of the viewers' right to be informed. Whatever the perspective, let's not forget that rumor -- or anonymous delusion feverishly spread on Facebook -- is not information.

In order to understand why disinformation campaigns are carried out this way, we need to analyze all its actors, notably the receiver, disseminator, as well as the originator. We are particularly interested in the mechanics of post-truth, which obliterates critical

thinking and leads many to accept as truth, without discernment, without chewing-over as it were, messages delivered by their media of choice. The phenomenon of the captive public deserves special attention. Equally guilty are the politicians who populate and even finance the media, in their constant search for voters. Populism is the fruit of the toxic marriage between the politicians, the media and the amorphous, manipulated public. Populism made it possible for such a large number of Romanian politicians to play an important role in Russia's disinformation campaign. Add, in the Becali graph above, other examples in the same vein. In other words, we should ask how it was possible for the big parties and the politicians of Romania to declare publicly that there is no coronavirus, that freedom is more important than health and life itself, that the face mask is a symbol of conformity and obedience.

Who benefits from disinformation?

Any disinformation campaign analysis would be incomplete without the answers to the questions “who” and “why”? Since 2015, the European External Action Service (EU institution) has had a mission to counter the disinformation campaigns that the Russian Federation is directing against the European Union. Since the beginning of the pandemic and until now, the service has counted over 600 deliberate disinformation actions, targeting only the EU. They were stored in the EUvsDisinfo database. In an investigation by Deutsche Welle (DW), journalists exposed the leading role played by the Russian media, noting that their reports on coronavirus, published in French, German and Spanish, had a higher rate of interaction than articles published in those countries by major national newspapers, such as “Le Monde”, “Der Spiegel” or “El País”. Why? Because, explains Christian Schwieter, co-author of the study, “stations like Russia Today (RT) report a lot about social protests and issues with emotional impact. Emotional stories provoke

more reactions on social platforms”⁹². The key word here is emotion, emotional news pieces. Then, the Russian state media reported in great detail about the anti-Covid protests and conspiracy theories. Chinese and Turkish state stations rather emphasize the alleged exemplary approach to the pandemic in their countries. According to researchers cited by DW, HispanTV - the Spanish-language program of Iranian state television “IRIB”, used the pandemic to make critical voices heard about the US⁹³.

When it comes to benefits, we should remember Russia used previous circumstances to destabilize its rivals and make people afraid, so that in the end it would endanger their lives. It is no longer a secret that we are in the middle of an information war, fought by all means, on all fronts, in which targets are organizations (NATO and EU), countries and their citizens, ordinary people. The World Health Organization has launched several calls on world governments to protect their citizens from the avalanche of false and malicious information. For this phenomenon, the WHO used the term *infodemia*. And yet, in the particular case of the Coronavirus crisis, what does Russia get? Nicolae Țibrigan, an expert in the analysis of the information war, identifies the following Russian objectives⁹⁴:

- weakening their strategic rivals (NATO and EU);
- reshaping the global order;
- strengthening populist forces in Western countries (Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain);
- strengthening separatist forces with anti-state discourse;
- emphasizing the idea that the Western model is no longer viable, no longer coping;

⁹² Joscha Weber, Mikhail Bushuev, “Fake news coronavirus: Who benefits from it?”, *Deutsche Welle*, 04.08.2020

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ Nicolae Țibrigan, “China’s 2.0 digital war is much more insidious than Russia’s”, *Hotnews*, 22.06.2020

- planting the seeds of currents that could be exploited in future actions, such as anti-Western, nationalist, xenophobic, hate movements against disadvantaged social groups (see social movements in African-American communities in the US).

China follows Russia's strategy

Another state actor with great interests in spreading false information is China. Caught on the wrong foot due to mismanagement of the disease, but especially because of hiding the truth about the outbreak of the epidemic and then its magnitude, China has had to make quick decisions for saving the image of a harmless country and especially its partners' trust. The first months of the year were a nightmare for China. Faced with a growing epidemic at home and a wave of international accusations that it is at the root of the planet's problems, Beijing has found itself in the midst of a global debate on one and the same subject: how guilty China is, how China should be forced to pay. An old rule of media warfare says that for any offensive there must be a counter-offensive, any narrative must have at least one counter-narrative. "China has brutally changed its foreign policy doctrine. In order to shift the world's attention from the origin of the virus, China has switched to Russian tactics, meaning it is attacking its adversary to create controversy among foreign public opinion"⁹⁵. More clearly, China has adopted a communication strategy in which it has made sure that the news about how the virus started and how it was managed in China is balanced by at least an equal amount of rumors about how the virus was created by the Russians, who sought to hack the Americans, or that it was the creation of the Americans to harm the Russians, or that it would be the creation of the Europeans to harm both of the above. Very interesting, notes Jean Tilliac in La

⁹⁵ Jean Tilliac, *op. cit.*

Tribune⁹⁶, these mirror rumors offered China the second phase of its disinformation campaign: the comparison game. At first, every country trying to cope with Coronavirus outbreak was compared to China, a game that the Chinese liked very much because the epidemic was almost a month late between China and the rest of the world. At the comparison moment, China was already better off. Then, comparisons were made between different countries, the most unfortunate setback being in the European Union where European solidarity suffered a real blow. Countries have closed their borders one by one and not a few have started pointing the finger at both Brussels and the capitals of sister countries in the EU. Finally, the blame game has been raised to the next level, destroying the fabric of democratic societies: trust. Politicians have begun to blame ordinary people for the spread of the disease by not complying with the sanitary rules which eventually led to ordinary people blaming politicians for not doing enough to stop human casualties. In the end, everyone came to blame everyone: the government on the people, the power on the opposition, the countries between them and the organizations between them. In these circumstances, does anyone still think where the virus came from and that we still do not have an answer to the crucial question: why did China wait two months to give the real news of its outbreak to the international community? Mission accomplished.

Finally, let us note once again that infodemia, as it has been called by the World Health Organization, cannot be assessed correctly in sequences. Let's go back a little to the seemingly harmless and "meaningless" nature of the first widely distributed information and stop for a while at the messages concerning the use of medicines, for instance Plaquenil. Let us start with the assumption that such an important viralisation was initiated by an individual. We can assume that a message about how useful Plaquenil can be in the

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

treatment against Covid-19 could have been written by an individual for personal reasons. However, there are three relevant issues:

1. Does a self-motivated individual have the means and interest to translate his Facebook post, word for word, into dozens of languages and distribute it where no connection of an ordinary person can reach?

2. An individual with personal motivations, let's say information sharing motivation, forgot to add (if he ever knew) the essential information that Plaquenil has important side effects: it forms blood clots. Thus, in France and the United States, there have been reports of emergencies and deaths of people, most of them elderly, who have taken Plaquenil as a precaution and have developed heart complications;

3. Put in the context of the offensive of messages about how to self medicate, because doctors do not want to tell the truth and the situation is out of control because the hospitals are overcrowded, the text about Plaquenil becomes plainly lethal. In an inventory of themes and narratives on the same subject, which our paper will make, it becomes clear that we are facing a concentrated effort, planned and staged to achieve objectives that can not be identified by sequential analysis.

Disinformation kills

When it comes to complex objectives, such as weakening strategic rivals or reshaping the global order, the effectiveness of the information war is more complicated to assess, there are two chapters in which Russia's actions have yielded results in record time. The first is loss of life. On the one hand, people who blindly followed the aberrant advice that circulated on the Internet died, on the other hand, thousands of people became infected, or infected others, because they did not care and did not respect barrier gestures, instigated by what they read on the internet or from politicians seen on TV. A study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical

Medicine, which involved researchers from 87 states, shows that a single article with false information led to 800 deaths (the article assuming that the use of highly concentrated alcohol in killing the virus, because in the early stages the virus would locate in the throat). In the mentioned study, the news and information gathered from the net for two months, March and April, were analyzed. In those months, “researchers discovered more than 2,000 claims about coronaviruses that went viral. Of those, 1,800 turned out to be false”⁹⁷.

The second chapter in which Russia’s disinformation actions have delivered in short time is that of weakening the state. Following the information bombardment and aberrant responses from some politicians, citizens no longer trust the state’s ability to cope with the situation and the fabric of society has disintegrated. The insidious pouring, little by little, in the minds of the people of the narratives according to which the state is outdated and the authorities hide the truth in order to control the citizens, has come to results, which are seen in the strong return of the epidemic in the autumn months. In addition to the sanitary and economic crises, there is a serious crisis of confidence.

- Let’s recap the comments made so far about the beginning of the Coronavirus disinformation campaign:
- it began seemingly innocent, with sensible medical advice;
- it has constantly struck the credibility of the authorities of any kind: medical, administrative, political;
- it continued in a crescendo with medical advice with potentially lethal effect: swallow substances and drugs!;
- “the blame game” between countries, multinational organizations and between politicians and ordinary people;

⁹⁷ Study: “Facebook has directed users to false information about coronavirus”, <https://romania.europalibera.org/>, 19.08.2020

- launching conspiracy theory sometimes supported by movies or audio recordings;
- the call for civic disobedience in the form of non-compliance with barrier gestures, the most serious form of accelerating the spread of the disease.

And let us remember that the ferment of destabilization already existed in society (post-truth and the public triangle - press - politicians), being exploited in the logic of information war, media offensive, by Russia and China.

An eloquent explanation of how disinformation also acts on itself (the message is ambiguous, it is not clear what it is, it is not understood in sequences, it can be easily suspected that it makes no sense) comes from the former Securitate General, Ion Mihai Pacepa: “In order to fight against this invisible weapon, disinformation, we must first recognize it as what it is and decode its hidden mission, since it is usually disguised in civilian clothes, seemingly harmless, as they were and the terrorists who killed thousands of Americans on September 11, 2001”⁹⁸.

For the conclusions of the “Russian” angle of this analysis, we return to the observations made by Nicolae Țîbrigan⁹⁹, about how Russia uses information as a weapon, especially in crisis situations:

1. it has a large volume and runs on many channels;
2. it is fast, continuous and repetitive;
3. no commitment to objective reality. It is open to any delusion, including contradictory ones;
4. without consistency, but compensating by other means¹⁰⁰.

If our research, originated from the information war around the Coronavirus pandemic, would stop at the finding that we are

⁹⁸ Ion Mihai Pacepa, Ronald J. Rychlak, *Disinformation*, Humanitas, București, 2015, p. 56

⁹⁹ Nicolae Țîbrigan, “Războiul digital 2.0 al Chinei este mult mai insidios decât cel al Rusiei”, *Hotnews*, 22.06.2020

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

facing a phenomenon with a common denominator - Russia (and/or China), this would be a dangerous simplification, because the phenomenon is much more complex. In fact, Russia and China are exploiting a certain state of the public, press and politicians, called post-truth, which makes possible the flood of lies and their rapid assimilation and spread, as we have seen. The unprecedented health crisis we are coping with has just amplified the processes and offered the opportunity for fear, the ideal state to plant the seeds for even more fear and distrust.

The lack of scientific education lends a helping hand

There is another element that contributes to infodemia. Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, writes that in America, and only in America, basic precautions against disease became fodder in a culture war¹⁰¹. Because of president Trump, who has long denied the truth about the danger and spread of Covid-19, Americans split in two groups: those who believe the disease exists and fear it, and those who believe in Donald Trump and his power to deny the existence of the virus. This segregation was fueled by the president himself, who once said that those who wear face masks want to prove they're against him. The rift deepened when Republican governors forced local authorities not to adopt restrictive measures. In the midst of an epidemiological crisis, America has become, essentially, a political battlefield on scientific issues. How is this possible? Krugman says that in American culture there is an old resistance to science and expertise. He reminds his readers that in the early 20th century, when the southern states were ravaged by pellagra, the federal government hired a doctor to look into the causes of the outbreak. He established that the disease was caused by poverty, more precisely by a diet based almost exclusively on corn,

¹⁰¹ Paul Krugmann, "A plague of willful ignorance is killing us", *New York Times*, 22.06.2020

poor in nutrients. Although the finding had been, for decades, accepted fact, politicians denied the evidence and fed people with speeches about how the north is against southern tradition. Instead of protecting their fellow citizens, southern politicians led people to believe that they were victims of a conspiracy hatched in the north. The disease continued to wreak havoc. Today, according to Paul Krugman, the denial of expertise and science makes it possible for a whole business community to claim, again taking its cue from Trump, that there is no global warming. The denial of Darwin's theory of evolution is, like the anti-vaxxer movement, part of the same mindset.

Emotion is a defining feature of post-truth. When Donald Trump denies global warming, or the new coronavirus, he communicates what he thinks, and especially how he feels about the subject. The people who listen to him and believe him assume the emotion he conveys. The creators of disinformation campaigns know this mentality; they know how to appeal to the public's emotions.

Conspiracy, much more interesting than scientific truth

Let's take a look at the mechanism. When in contact with often unpleasant scientific information, conspiracy theorists reject its relevance and choose to believe theories that cannot be proven. Deniers and other ideologues show doubt about facts they don't want to believe, but complete trust towards facts that fit their agenda. It's a double standard. What interests us here is what favors this faith, this uncritical belief, this unwillingness to be led by scientific evidence. It is the mechanism at the heart of post-truth: people feel and don't reason. In contrast, the scientific view of the world is that some things and situations are true, no matter what we think or feel about them. It is the cruel truth, and acceptance of it should be taught in school.

Donald Trump once presented to the TV cameras a hurricane-path map altered to fit his earlier predictions. Many rational people lay down their arms, utterly helpless in the face of populism's onslaught; the spectacle of lying politicians drives them away from the public scene, from civic participation, even voting. The danger is huge. Post-truth turns into a kind of ideological supremacy, in which you have no chance: you either believe or are excluded, says Lee McIntyre from MIT Boston¹⁰².

This is one of the main reasons for studying disinformation wars. If we know and understand the process through which lies become raw material for public communication and eventually the sole currency of societal meaning-exchanges, then we can come up with an antidote. When we go to the doctor, we expect him/her to heal us based on science, not on what we want to hear, at the risk of dying the next day. As Professor McIntyre says, "Do we want to live in a world where public policies are made based on how they make us feel, or rather on how good their results will actually be?"¹⁰³.

References

Barclay, Donald A., *Fake news, Propaganda and Plain Old Lies*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018

Barron, John, Barron, Miller, Dixon-Milhouse, Nicolai, *Fake news, facts always Trump truth*, Prion, 2017

Besancon, Alain, *Imaginea interzisa. Istoria intelectuala a iconoclasmului de la Platon la Kandinsky*, Editura Humanitas, 1996

Carey, Kelly, *Fake news. How propaganda influenced the 2016 Election, a historical comparison to 1930's Germany*, Marzenhale Publishing, 2017

¹⁰² Lee McIntyre, "Post-truth", *MIT Press*, 2018, p. 13

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

Chomsky, Noam, *Media control. The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, Open Media Pamphlet Series editors, 1997

Craig, David, *How to become a human bullshit detector. Learn to spot fake news, fake people and absolute lies*, Racehorse Publishing, 2017

Fuchs, Christian, *Nationalism on the internet*, Routledge, 2020

Gheorghiu-Cernat, Manuela, *Filmul si armele. Tema pacii si a razboiului in filmul european*, Meridiane, 1983

Harari, Yuval Noah, *21 de lectii pentru secolul XXI*, Polirom, 2018

Holiday, Ryan, *Trust me, I'm lying. Confessions of a media manipulator*, Profile Books, 2018

Johnson, Alan, *Orwell on truth*, Harvil Secker, 2017

Le Bon, Gustave, *Psihologia multimilor*, Antet XX Press, 2007

McIntyre, Lee, *Post-truth*, the MIT Press, 2018

McLuhan, Marshall, *Să înțelegem media. Extensiile omului*, Curtea Veche, 2011

Pacepa, Ion Mihai, Rychlak, Ronald J., *Dezinformarea. Un fost spion-sef dezvaluie strategiile secrete de subminare a libertatii, de atac impotriva religiei si de promovare a terorismului*, Humanitas, 2015

Peters, Michael A., *Post-truth, Fake News*, Springer, 2018

Sartori, Giovanni, *Homo videns. Imbecilizarea prin televiziune si post-gandirea*, Humanitas, 2005

Schwarz, A. Brad, *Broadcast hysteria. Orson Welles's War of the Worlds and the art of fake news*, Hill and Wang, 2015

Online sources

Krugmann, Paul, “Molima ignoranței asumate”, *New York Times*, 22.06.2020

Tilliac, Jean, “Coronavirus: Primul Război Mondial al dezinformării”, *La Tribune*, 08.04.2020

Țîbrigan, Nicolae, “Războiul digital 2.0 al Chinei este mult mai insidios decât cel al Rusiei”, *Hotnews*, 22.06.2020

Weber, Jocha și Bushuev, Mikhail, “Fake news coronavirus: Cine profită?”, *Deutsche Welle*, 04.08.2020

“COVID-19. Gigi Becali anunță «Am comandat 100.000 de pastile din Rusia»“, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 06.04.2020

“Studiu: Facebook a îndrumat utilizatorii spre informații false privind coronavirusul”, *Radio Europa Liberă*, 19.08.2020

Cosmin Prelipceanu (46 y/o) is a journalist with over 20 years of experience in radio and tv. He currently hosts the prime time show for the news channel Digi24, with thousands of airtime hours of reporting on the main current affairs issues and interviewing presidents, prime-ministers, members of the Executive Cabinet and Parliament. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Marketing, a Post-academic Degree in Communication Sciences. Cosmin Prelipceanu can be reached by e-mail: cosmin.prelipceanu@yahoo.ro.