

## INFODEMIC OR MISINFORMATION 2.0

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### Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic led to the creation of a parallel manoeuvring space for mass misinformation, manipulation and raising symbolic political and financial capital. Panic and the lack of basic medical knowledge represented the main elements that the creators of fake news used in order to build an empire of non-sense with audience at various types of public, especially the one within the area of social networks. Under these circumstances, the medical epidemic is now accompanied by infodemic or misinformation 2.0, with negative consequences for the information consumer who has to become immune to the virulent attack of fake news.

**Keywords:** *infodemic, fake news, misinformation 2.0, immunization, social listening.*

In recent years, communication specialists from all over the world raise numerous alarm signals regarding the extremely negative consequences of the presence of false news in the media. In this situation we do not speak about the mistakes made by beginner journalists who do not verify the information from at least three sources and who do not obtain a balance of statements through the implication of all affected parties in a certain rumour. We do not also speak about the regrettable typos or about the broadcast of some information related to some events which are presented in real time and that are, at times, subjected to errors, and subsequently corrected. Time pressure, the one who first broadcasts some news may trigger misinformation, that may or may not later be adjusted. If this time, the audience represents the target of some well-analysed and targeted actions, which represent an intentional misinformation with the purpose of gaining a certain image capital which, in the end, translates itself through financial pluses. But with very serious consequences for both the individuals and the great enterprises.

Opinion makers consider that the main reasons why this kind of news appears is the rush for clicks, the struggle for audience, traffic and advertising money. We therefore speak about a strictly financial interest. Smaller sites also follow the search tendencies on Google. If, in Romania, the most widely-searched topics on the Internet are the horoscope, the weather forecast and currently the information about COVID 19, according to these searches one has to come up with some "fashionable news", in order to be there in the foreground and to attract traffic, according to various media specialists.

Different categories of public are being targeted, according to the interest area of those who launch fake news. Apparently, no one is excluded. Therefore, the question naturally appears: how can one protect the uninformed readers from the harmful effects of intentionally erroneous information. The first and maybe the most important step would be to pay more attention to the source and an attempt to check some particular news on other sites. Many media consumers, no matter if they use the classical channels (television, radio or written press) or the modern, online channels accept some news only if they are directly interested, using just one general information channel, without consulting other sources and without trying to understand the phenomenon in its depth.

Therefore, the information received are superficial and when they try to put these notions into practice, they encounter a series of obstacles which could have been avoided if, initially, they had looked for answers on this topic. This is the consequence of an unconditional faith in the means of mass communication, especially in televisions. This is why, the phrase "if you want to be strong, you have to be informed" falls into

derision, since the intentionally erroneous information received is never complete, and a small detail overturns the whole structure of truthfulness and credibility, which makes it useless at the right time.

The February 2019 Eurobarometer regarding the “fake news” phenomenon and the media consumption show that the public perceives the tradition media channels as being the most trustworthy: radio (70%), TV (66%) and print newspapers/magazines (63%). Only publications and news portal record only 47% trust (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2018). In Romania, radio and TV channels present 66% trust, while print newspapers and magazines are awarded only 45%. For the news sites and online sources – only 37% of the Romanians surveyed stated that they trust the information accessed.

Speaking about the fake news phenomenon in the EU, 37% of the Eurobarometer respondents claim that they encounter fake news on a daily basis and 71% say that they are confident that they can distinguish the fake news. In Romania, 79% of the respondents claim that they recognize fake news when they encounter it on different channels.

The tackling of the ample digital misinformation phenomenon, known as misinformation 2.0, cannot begin only with the end user, but it must also deal with the identification, exposure and discrediting of voices, messages, practices and amplification technologies.

In order to try and differentiate an authentic news site from one which presents fake press materials, we established some criteria which have to be taken into account when the first suspicions appear regarding the trustfulness of information:

➤ **the fake news site does not have an editorial office presented in its description and it does not have an assumed signatory (editor) for the articles presented;** every media institution which enjoys credibility, starting from the international ones such as CNN and BBC, up to the Romanian ones such as TVR and PROTV, was always represented by an editorial office and an editorial staff which assumes the articles and the shows, signs and presents them in an as transparent manner as possible to the audience; the fact that a site

which promises trustful media materials does not have a public editorial staff or a signatory for articles, who should also include a short personal biography, represents a criterion in regarding it as a fake news site;

- **the fake news site does not present a transparent contact address and a contact person,** both useful and necessary for questions, commentaries and maybe a right to reply;
- **the fake news site does not offer details regarding the sources of the articles, nor does it offer information regarding the sources of the photos that it uses;** the photos may normally come either from a photographer of the editorial staff or from a photo agency, and their origin has to be presented;
- **the fake news site does not mention any editorial office and therefore it does not present any clue about the people who are behind the development of that particular article.**

In a report belonging to Active Watch, issued at the beginning of this year, **on the topic of the freedom of the press in Romania, it is shown the fact that the fake news phenomenon has also contaminated the media environment in our country** (ACTIVE WATCH, 2019). The report showed that different events of general interest, such as the local and the parliamentary elections or the civil protests of the last three years offered the occasion to widespread misinformation and manipulation, propagated both by the mainstream media and by various websites.

The combination between fake news and the closed circle is alarming. In this regard, many specialists accused the increase in social media of the so-called “filter-babble”, a phenomenon which shows users a content to their own liking and hiding other kinds of news. Critics say that this aspect distorts the general image and inhibits the neutral perspective, which means that the most interesting stories can be obtained with the highest of care. This idea according to which society informs itself only according to its own preferences and that it filters reality only with the help of particular information channels may have detrimental consequences. The viral content of news, announcements, rumours or pictograms which appeal to the public spread quickly from

one person to the other, usually without paying any attention to the veracity of the content.

We shall analyse some fake news presented by press sites and by the social networks in Romania during the state of emergency and the state of alert, which followed the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic. We shall conduct a qualitative research, based on simple observation, without the direct involvement of the subject.

We start from some information which appeared in the media on April 13, 2020, during the state of emergency: Antena 3 presented a short video which showed “thousands of Romanians” who went to work in Germany during “a time of pandemic” and “without respecting the social distancing.” The TV station implied that they are the Romanians who went to Germany, on Thursday, from the Cluj Napoca airport. The news was broadcasted by news bulletins of Antena 3 and later on it was presented on the antena3.ro website, according to ziaristii.com. The images presented as being up to date actually belong to 2016 and they show thousands of Romanians who went in columns to pick onions, in the Mannheim region, in Germany (YOUTUBE, 2020a).



**Fig. 1. A stop frame from a 2016 movie, presented as belonging to April 2020**

The 68 second movie presents happy, cheerful, optimistic people and not some “slaves”, as they were presented, notes the quoted source.

Here is how this news was published on the Antena 3 website. The title was: **The image of Romania picking green onion in Germany, during a time of pandemic.**

“Thousands of cramped Romanians waiting to enter the plots of land. The images were taken

this morning in a town in Germany. There are hundreds of Romanians waiting to enter the plots of land in order to pick green onion. There is no sort of social distancing. In the last three days, only from the airport in Cluj, over 3600 Romanians went to different towns in Germany. Because of the uncertainty of what the next day will bring, as they do not have jobs in Romania, thousands of Romanians left their families, right before the Easter Holiday. They went to Germany for agricultural work. The images raise questions regarding the protection that should be offered to workers during the Coronavirus pandemic. Thousands of people are waiting in an enormous queue, crowded together, for their turn to enter the green onion plots.”

The author of the images, Vasile Țiplea, geography teacher and market manager in Ieud, reacted following the fake news presented by Antena 3 and he deleted the film from his Facebook account, so that it could no longer be taken over. “I want to offer an explanation regarding a post which contains a film made by me in 2016 when my fellow villagers and I went work in agriculture in Germany. In order for the people back home to be able to see them we recorded that video and posted it on Facebook. Because many Romanian workers left from Cluj to Germany, many people started sharing this post as if it were up to date. It even ended up being broadcasted on Antena 3, without specifying the source and with the aim of manipulating the public. Regarding the content of this filming, I can only say that those people earn in a period of two months as much as they would earn in a year in our country. I wish you all the best and pay attention to where you get your information from”, explained Vasile Țiplea. Subsequently, the Maramures prefecture signalled that Antena 3 presented some churlish fake news. In a Facebook post, the institution sent the following message: “The people who recognized themselves in those images say that they are 5 or 6 years old. (...) Also, these people are currently home with their families and they appear in these images!”

On April 22, 2020, the National Regulatory Agency in Communications (NRAC) decided to close a series of websites in Romania because they published a series of articles spreading fake

news regarding the Coronavirus pandemic. The sites which were closed because they published fake news are the following:

- stiridemoment.ro;
- breakingnews.xyz;
- romania-veche.ro;
- justitiarul.ro;
- bpnews.ro;

Among the titles and the materials published on these sites, both the Strategic Communication Group and NRAC remembered the following:

- "Kaufland, Auchan, Metro, Carrefour and Lidl close starting from Monday"
- "Coronavirus killed by Polidin"
- "ATTENTION: TRICK & DECEPTION or the 5G antennas and COVID?"
- "Europe Defender 20 or the beginnings of a new world war?"
- "The truth behind the virus: The American army and Defender Europe 20"
- "A military exercise or a secret operation? What are the American soldiers doing in Verona without masks?"
- "The COVID hysteria: a pretext for abusive laws and limitation of human rights"
- "The government is preparing a mega-operation to bring back to the country many Romanians who are abroad"

The Strategic Communication Group mentions that it presented the Internal Affairs Minister the proposal to shut down these sites since, following their analyses, it resulted the fact that these sites "select and take truncated statements and information that they headline in alarmist formulations and expressions, meant to generate panic among the citizens."

"The titles of the materials posted on the above-mentioned sites are either completely false, or they have nothing to do with some official decisions belonging to the entities they refer to. Such titles can generate inadequate social behaviours, disproportioned with the real situation. Also, the sites closed do not have any identity and no contact people were identified", according to the Strategic Communication Group.

Another intensely debated topic in the press was related to the thermoscanning of the population when entering supermarkets or

public institutions, upon entering the state of alert.

The online newspaper *ebihoreanu.ro* presents the following situation occurred following a series of fake campaigns on Facebook and YouTube (YOUTUBE, 2020b).



**Fig. 2. A stop frame from a film posted on YouTube regarding the so-called riot at the entrance of a supermarket**

A film made at the entrance of a Kaufland supermarket in Bucharest is intensively debated in online, some people claiming that the police who handcuffed a man because he refused to present his identity card committed an abuse. It all started from the fact that three individuals did not accept to have their temperature measured when entering the supermarket. Instead of going to another market, a man and a woman began to make a fuss, shouting and quoting from various laws. The Police was called to the scene.

The 13-minute video was published on a YouTube account which hosts conspiracy theories of the topic of Covid-19. The film was made public after the images were initially processed and edited with the intention of misinforming.

The film presents right from the beginning the interaction between the two people and the security guards who wanted to measure their temperatures, but they refused quoting from various laws and from the Constitution. Then, the video presents the entire intervention of the police, the police officers handcuffing one of the men.

According to Digi 24 television channel, it is suspicious that everything was filmed before the police intervention, from the first dialogue, and

the fact that the protagonists of the scandal - a man and a woman - seem to wear microphones, given the quality of the audio recording when they speak.

The police agents arrived at the scene ascertained that, in fact, two men and one woman refused termoscanning and they were acting violently. When the police asked them to identify themselves, the people refused, become violent and displayed an aggressive behaviour, which led to their immobilization and taking to the police station. Bucharest police force also announce that "The people were sanctioned for minor offenses, according to the provisions of Law no. 61/1991, for refusing to legitimize, provoking scandal and preventing the intervention of police officers in fulfilling their duties."

After this incident reached the press and the social media, the representatives of Kaufland stated the fact that everything was, in fact, directed by the troublemakers. "Our supermarkets do no longer test the temperature at the entrance. We ask our customers to respect hygiene and social distancing measures while doing their shopping. The incident which took place two days ago was staged, with the purpose of creating the sensational, the two people being wired and being accompanied by a professional cameraman. We confirm that the security guards respected all the procedures, which include the contacting of the competent authorities in managing such cases of aggression and non-compliance. We urge our customers to respect the protection measures while shopping, to keep calm and put their safety, as well as that of the others first. We are doing everything we can to stop the spread of the virus and we are in permanent contact with the authorities" - notes the company of its Facebook account.

The site [adevarul.ro](http://adevarul.ro) notes that the film of the incident, professionally staged and mounted, which supports the viewpoint of the attackers, was published on his Facebook account by the stage director George Adamescu. The same YouTube channel also hosts some video materials on the topic of different conspiracy theories, such as the anti-5 G meetings.

The video also includes explanations in the form of text and extracts from various laws and

the Constitution, which seeks to induce the idea that measuring the temperature at the entrance to various institutions and closed public spaces would be illegal and would violate the rights stipulated in the Constitution.

The head of the Department for Emergency Situations, Raed Arafat, also reacted on Facebook, saying that "the digital termoscanner does not record any personal data, it does not record chips, it does not take pictures, it does not record the name, address and the personal identification number of an individual. It only displays the temperature and it can be used by the non-medical staff trained to use such devices."

Raed Arafat also stated that anyone can refuse to have his or her temperature taken but, in this case, he or she "cannot enter that particular space as it is the right of the community and of the employees who work in that space to protect themselves."

Despite the proof that the film was rigged and that it was used with the purpose to misinform and provoke, as well as the scientific information offered to the public by various specialists, numerous people have later on refused termoscanning, considering that some of their rights are not respected and that they are exposed to energy stimuli difficult to prove.

Such situations that may appear on television or radio can be prevented or sanctioned by the National Audiovisual Council (NAC). In May and June 2020, NAC gave several summonses and fines to some radio and television stations for the way they presented certain subjects. Here is a list of the stations sanctioned: Radio Guerilla, Antena3, România TV or Digi24.

Yet, the sanctions given by the National Audiovisual Council or the Strategic Communication Group during the period of emergency did not have the hardness and consistency necessary to guarantee the observance of the law and professional deontology for those who were caught in flagrante delicto. One proof of this is the reopening of the [justitiarul.ro](http://justitiarul.ro) website, which had been closed for fake news a week before.

Misinformation and fake news are extremely damaging and that is why are seen as a second pandemic which directly affects each of us, alongside the pandemic caused by the new

Coronavirus. This idea is supported by the high rating recorded by such TV shows or the impressive number of views or likes that fake news materials receive. This is why, the media professionals are looking for effective ways of immunizing the public to the fake news virus. This endeavour is complicated because it requires a vaccine which should take into account the complexity of every news consumer, regardless of the communication means.

The proliferation of misinformation, even when at first sight it is harmless, has the most serious consequences, with ramifications in all areas, especially in a time of crisis.

According to an article which appeared this summer on the website of the World Health Organization the rumours regarding the lack of food because of the pandemic made people create impressive stockpiles of supplies, which caused serious supply problems for chain stores around the world (WHO, 2020). The same article tells us that in America a person died after having ingested a product used to clean fish tanks and which contained chloroquine. This thing happened after a series of medical reports nominated hydroxychloroquine as a possible remedy for COVID 19, a fact which has not been scientifically proven since. Also, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, hundreds of people lost their lives after they drunk methanol because the social media sites presented messages claiming that this type of alcohol had cured patients with COVID.

Communication experts acknowledge the fact that these so-called infodemics were also present in the past when the population confronted with other major epidemics, but at moment the phenomenon is becoming exponential due to the numerous means of communication and the transmission speed of information or rumours. The reality is that intervention regarding various misinformation is done to late. In this regard, the World Health Organization cooperates with a company that weekly analyses 1.6 million pieces of information posted on various social platforms and then classifies these topics into four categories: cause, disease, interventions and treatment. Thus, it is possible to follow the health information that has the largest audience and, in parallel, to develop a strategy to adapt these

messages with the correct and verified information. Moreover, the software used in the analysis of various posts allows to obtain information regarding the types of emotions that users experience. Therefore, an efficient offensive strategy can be developed and this may reduce the publics' interest in fake news.

Basically, we speak about "social listening", one of the trends of digital marketing, combined with monitoring tools which "learn on their own" to combat the infodemic.

Studies show that misinformation is recurrent. Basically, at certain periods of time, the same types of misinformation, or of rumours appear on the social media sites. Their prevention is done by counterattacks posted simultaneously with the false news based on the algorithm issued by "social listening."

In conclusion, the pandemic triggered by the new coronavirus is in a fierce competition with infodemic or the epidemic of misinformation. Researchers from all over the world make use of artificial intelligence and big data in their attempt to build models to combat fake news. A war, in which we all eventually take part and we fight with our own weapons, either more or less sophisticated, but which start from the concept of common sense. And one of the main responsibilities of the end user of the information process is that before he gives a like or a share to go beyond the title and the image of the article and to read the whole content in order to enlighten himself on the credibility of the information. Any scandalous or questionable headline should be checked by searching other trusted sites to see to what extent the information is confirmed.

As comfortable as it may seem to take all the information presented by television or radio channels for granted, and especially those from the online environment of from the social media sites, it is useful for us to check the news at least from the point of view of common sense so that we do not become the victims of manipulation and of the obscure interests of some people who do not obey the law and who only try to take advantage of us, relying on the distribution of fake news released or turning us into a manoeuvring mass which brings a symbolic political and financial capital.

In the 2008 volume entitled “The effects of television of the human mind”, which appeared at the Prodromos Publishing House, in Bucharest, the author Virgiliu Gheorghe, a specialist in Biophysics states that people use various means of communication during the period of crisis, because this is the authority which is required, the instance which increases their trust, defends and leads them (GHEORGHE, 2008). Thus, by suggesting danger, by maintaining the tension, the psychosis of fear, the media ensures not only its audience, but also a high degree of credibility. The stress of violence represents the main means of persuasion for the media message and an increase in the stress level represents the gate towards the manipulation of the conscience of the individuals.

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