



**POLITICAL COMMITTEE: Topic 2**

**THE ISSUE OF INFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS DURING  
THE ERA OF COVID-19**

The spreading of false information has recently been becoming of higher global and public concern in light of the recent pandemic. With the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been an exponential increase in the publication of and diffusion of misleading fake information regarding the virus, especially on popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok and Twitter. Dubbed the Coronavirus “Infodemic”, COVID-19 misinformation has had a strong negative influence of the widespread adoption of health protective behaviours on the population. Fake news regarding the pandemic have proliferated widely; the field ranges from inaccurate statistics to dangerous information, even going as far as false conspiracy theories regarding the manufacture of the vaccine variants.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, fake news has mainly been related to health issues (contagiousness, social distancing, mortality rates, drugs, masks, vaccinations, etc.). The sharp increase of fake news during the pandemic has even been considered by some to be a “second pandemic”; recent studies of the phenomenon have alluded towards an implied connection between fake news and strong misperceptions or misconceptions in the pandemic context. It was furthermore found that exposure to social media were in turn associated with lower compliance with restrictive health measures.

**Examples:**

Recent examples of false information being spread through social media regarding the coronavirus pandemic and potential treatments for it include advocating for alleged cures such as “gargling with lemon or salt water” or even “injecting yourself with bleach”. Recently trending on platforms such as Tiktok, these “cures” are obviously attempted and “rated” according to their effectiveness. Extending the notion to conspiracy theories on the topic of vaccinations, it has been falsely suggested that the virus was “bioengineered in a lab in Wuhan” or even that “the 5G cellular network is causing or exacerbating symptoms of COVID-19.”

Fake news regarding the virus have also been actively promoted and advertised through well-known political figures and elites. Famous example includes former President of the United States, Donald Trump, and Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, publicly discussing the pandemic and asserting that substances such as hydroxychloroquine was being used and “working in all places” as an effective treatment against contagion and the virus itself.



Widening the scope of the issue has been the recent publication and advertisement of the conspiracy film “Plandemic”, a product of planned disinformation regarding the Pandemic and the diffusion of the COVID-19 virus in general. Appearing online in May 2020, and gathering millions of multi-national viewers, the film has become one of the most well-known examples of coronavirus-related methods of diffusion of false information. Promoting dangerous and misconceived health advice, the film has led to confusion and debate across various platforms, exploiting the public’s misconceptions and questions to gain monetary profit. Perceived by researchers and public alike as one of the most “outrageous” claims regarding health advice in light of the pandemic, the film promoted the notion that wearing protective masks in reality “activates” the virus. This constitutes one of the many misinformed forms of guidance provided by “Plandemic” to its viewers.

### **Risk perception:**

The concept of risk perception refers to the general public’s subjective judgement regarding the likelihood of negative occurrences tied to the topic at hand. With a more specific orientation towards the issue of fake news during the pandemic, it has been noted that the exponential increase in the publication and spreading of misinformation regarding coronavirus has led to a significant increase in compliance with public health guidelines and restrictions, as well as hesitancy towards vaccinations.

A recent study conducted by American political scientist – specialized in the study of conspiracy theories and public perception – has revealed that belief in conspiracies is strongly associated with a propensity to reject information coming from expert authorities, as opposed to information gathered online or through unreliable sources. Similar findings were reported through concurrent socio-political studies, noting a further link between belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and a strong increase in vaccine hesitancy.

Recording and analysing risk perception is crucial to the abolishment of the issue of the diffusion of fake news: preceding the institutionalization and the accessibility of vaccinations for the general public, polls taken in the United States revealed that only around 50% of Americans were willing to be administered a potential vaccine, greatly undermining the potential for herd immunity against the COVID-19 virus. As a result of the “5G Conspiracy Theory”, 50 phone masts were set on fire and destroyed in the United Kingdom.

Following the President of Brazil’s (Jair Bolsonaro) inaccurate depiction of the health risks tied to the spread of the virus in February 2020, the analysis of about 55 million geo-coded devices served as evidence of a drastic reduction in social distancing, with a strong emphasis in pro-government areas. These results are reflected in similar analyses in countries such as the United States, in particular following political divergence over preventative health measures.



### **Possible solutions:**

The minimization of the publication of fake news on social media has largely been centred around preventive health measures and misinformation regarding the pandemic, however, the issue of false information can be extended to most areas, including fields such as socio-political issues, the 2020 United States elections, issues with regards to social injustice, climate change and many more areas of debate and discussion. Below is a list of possible initiatives that could and should be taken in order to begin fighting against the diffusion of misinformation, in particular centred around the pandemic:

#### **1. Increasing visibility/labelling**

Engaging with false information increases the possibility of the public noticing it and understanding its dangers. Functions on platforms such as Instagram or Twitter allow for the republication of other users' content could include warning for possibly fake material. By adding steps to "reposting" or "retweeting" fake news, companies could ensure that users maximize exposure to the issue at hand.

#### **2. Compulsory "Fact Checking"**

One of the most efficient and effective – although at times time and resource consuming – methods to individuate and eliminate the spread of false information is through fact checking. This can take place on an individual level, by automatically looking at and considering factors such as authors, accuracy, and objectivity, as well as on an industrial and social scales, by rendering authenticity inherently compulsory through the implementation of a structure within social media platforms.

#### **3. Educating and Raising Awareness**

As with all socio-political issues, one of the most effective methods in minimizing an issue is by maximizing its exposure to the public. By educating younger generations regarding the possible dangers that are linked to the spreading of misinformation, their tendency towards this type of action would hopefully be eventually reduced, and their ability to recognize such situations would be enhanced. Of course, this method does not deploy a final solution to the issue at hand, but rather proposes a possible course of action to reduce its effects on society currently.



**Examples of preventative measures that have already been taken:**

**Facebook:**

- Updating its algorithm with News Feed
- Punishing groups who repeatedly spread fake news
- Partnering with fact-checking organizations

**YouTube**

- Banning conspiracy theory content
- Banning deepfake videos

**Further reading:**

- 17<sup>th</sup> March 2021 – Global Media and Information Literacy Week - <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/75/L.68>
- <https://www.europol.europa.eu/covid-19/covid-19-fake-news>
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1084804521001326>
- <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.562588/full>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/fighting-misinformation-in-the-time-of-covid-19-one-click-at-a-time>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7395797/>