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The COVID-19 Infodemic – An Accelerated Version of the New Digital Ecosystem

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in terms of its quasi-simultaneous global reach and its multilayered character (medical, economic, political, geopolitical and social). It is also unprecedented because it is the first pandemic of the digital age, thus offering an accelerated version of the digital eco-system: interconnectedness across countries, regions, and even continents; globalization/ trans-nationalization of the national/ local communication spaces coupled by the circulation of global polluted narratives which are strikingly similar in terms of content in spite of their appearance of being tailored, even “extremely personalized” to fit local characteristics; and the preeminence of digital platforms within the communication ecosystem, including the semi-private or downright private ones such as WhatsApp or Facebook private messaging applications. Out of these emerging features, we will focus our analysis on the last interconnected two: globalization of seemingly local narratives and the emergence of the WhatsApp or Facebook private instant messaging applications as prominent transmission/ contagion means. We will do so by carrying an in-depth case study of Romania, which may offer an insight into more generalizable trends.

2. Emerging features of the digital ecosystem

The Covid-19 crisis is exceptionally disruptive and unprecedented because it is the first pandemic of the digital age and it evolves amid global power competition between the United States, the superpower that has resolutely dominated the international arena for the past 75 years and the emerging power, China. The fact that the crisis originated in China and hit the US badly further compounds the nature of the global power competition, with the two major powers appearing to engage on a collision course, including on the rhetorical battlefield.

No wonder that the actual pandemic has been closely coupled by the global infodemic (World Health Organisation, 2020) of rumors, conspiracies, fake news and other deadly nar-

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ratives (Valero, 2020), one that offers an accelerated version of the emerging features of the contemporary digital ecosystem.

The unfolding of the infodemic illustrates the red thin line between disinformation, misinformation and malinformation (Wardle, & Derakhshan, 2017); competitive storytelling among state, non-state, commercial, political and geopolitical actors, what European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, has called “the global battle of narratives” (Borrell, 2020); hybridization of communication spaces, meaning their semi-private and their semi-public character, as well as the coexistence between extreme globalization and extreme localization, even tribalism of content and rhetorical devices.

One spectacular feature is that, in spite of the huge volume of contradictory/ misleading information about the COVID-19 pandemic, one can notice a certain similarity of the polluted narratives circulating at a global/ transnational level. Most of the time, these polluted narratives are spread along private instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook in the form of hyper-personalized content (“just for you”, “this is meant only for you”, “coming from close friends”, “coming from close relatives”). They are distributed intensely below radar, almost with no public scrutiny and no chance for content curation, then they jump into more public/ mainstream outlets (such as Facebook public pages, newsfeeds, blogs, online sites and even mainstream media outlets).

In the remaining of this article, we will illustrate these last two features (quasi-similarity of polluted narratives and their global spread alongside semi-private messaging applications by referring to Romania as a case study. We will start by briefly discussing the global waves of polluted information identified by fact checkers around the world and go on by discussing their circulation with local overtones in Romania.

3. Localization of the global infodemic: a case study in Romania

The infodemic spreading along the actual coronavirus pandemic did not make an exception in Romania. At the height of the lockdown measures (March and April 2020), polluted narratives largely followed the same global patterns identified by International Fact-Checking Association (Tardáguila, 2020), a task-force of over 40 professional fact-checkers from 30 countries: origin of the virus, miracle cures, conspiracies driven by political (Deep State) or commercial (new economic world order) interests, “mandatory vaccination agenda”, miraculous cures, distortions and panic related to the containment measures. They also followed the same contagion means (especially via private messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, with strong inroads into more mainstream spaces, such as Facebook accounts, public pages, blogs, sites and TV channels). Here are some of the most shared examples:

a. the virus was “engineered” in a lab from China/ US/ Israel, in order to disrupt “Chinese/ American” interests, alternatively, to promote “Chinese/ American/ rich people/ Jews’ interests, to “impose a new global order” (alternatively US-led, China-led); or “to get rid of old/ poor/ vulnerable people”; to impose/ or, alternatively, to stop the climate change agenda;

b. there are miracle cures to the current illness: vitamin C, black tea, salt water, baking soda, vinegar, cheap medications or even vaccines: these cures are “hidden”, “denied”, “taken away”, even “stolen” by the same actors mentioned above (US, China, “the Jews”, “the rich people”) or by new ones (“Germany”, “the European Union”); the story about a “fully-

fledged” Romanian vaccine (Romania Insider, 2020) discovered at a local cancer research clinic in the city of Timisoara attracted heavy coverage from mainstream media, too;

c. “they” (mostly “Westerners”/ “foreigners”, with some more personalization in some instances, e.g. Bill Gates, George Soros) seek to impose vaccination, to implant chips (with different motivations – surveillance, discipline, destruction of the traditional family, of the conservative values).

During the same period, we have also identified a handful of instances of the global infodemic which appear to be more local, customized to the Romanian context.

One such local manifestation is the controversy surrounding religious practices. The Romanian Orthodox Church has the largest following of all religions in the country (81.9% of the entire population, cf. Index Mundi, 2019). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, unlike the Catholic Church in Western Europe, the high representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church have been reluctant to adapt their practices to the prevention measures, especially in what the Holy Communion was concerned. The Romanians split into two sides, one consisting of hard-core believers and another of outraged, health-aware citizens. This binary opposition is not novel. Religious versus secular arguments were heatedly exchanged in Romania on other topics, such as the allocation of budgetary funds for the construction of a huge cathedral downtown Bucharest, or other socially sensitive topics (e.g. LGBT rights, same sex marriage, abortion). This rhetorical clash is part of a larger anti-Western, conservative movement, which gained traction during the days preceding the celebration of the Orthodox Easter (April 19), when the official decision to keep churches closed was re-interpreted as a “new Agenda to close down Orthodox churches forever”.

By far the most spectacular local example refers to the rhetorical clash between the local population and representatives of the Romanian diaspora normally living in Italy or Spain and fleeing in large numbers to Romania after these two countries were put under lockdown at the beginning of March. Official information provided by the Ministry of Interior indicates that 300,000 Romanians returned home in March 2020 (out of which only 50,000 from the crisis-struck Italy) (DIGI24, 2020). These numbers have been amplified in the public discourse to “thousands”, “millions”, “countless hoards”.

Emotionally charged arguments have been tossed by both sides in both mainstream and social media, including via private messaging apps (Facebook and WhatsApp): the diaspora claiming their right to return home, dramatically emphasizing the precariousness of their jobs and housing situation in a locked-down Italy/Spain, the locals accusing them of cowardly, anti-social and criminal behavior and of spreading the disease. Dramatic images with people “besieging the frontier” (by land or by air) have been shared, the source of these images being sometimes unclear. Extreme rhetorical devices have been used by both rhetorical camps: “exodus”, “bio-terrorists”, “walking biological bombs”, “genocide”, with equally distributed outbursts of patriotism, even ethnicity (“homecoming”, “home country – the place where to die or get buried”, “die with our peers and next to our ancestors”).

But, even this particular manifestation, with rather unique roots in the socio-demographic situation of the Romanian-born citizens living outside country borders appears to be a local instance of a global polarizing narrative and rhetorical device, that of “other”-ing the enemy, finding shelter during times of uncertainty in a pure category “us” as opposed to the distant “them” (“different”, “filthy”, “malicious”, in this case, “sick”, “contagious”). It is, in other terms, an instance of the clash along us/ them fault lines.

4. Do conspiracies work? Evidence from a national survey amid the pandemic

Evidence regarding the networks of Covid-19 polluted narratives, their originators and amplifiers is difficult to pile, especially given their quasi-private circulation on closed Facebook WhatsApp instant messaging applications, with EEAS Special Report providing a notable exception (EEAS, 2020).

Do these polluted narratives work, or shall we dismiss them as “funny”, “awkward”, “illogical”, or “childish distractions” (Allison, 2020)?

During the period March 20-23, 2020 we conducted a national survey on the adult, not institutionalized, Romanian population (stratified sample using online panel, 1,160 respondents, sample error +/-3%, at a 95% confidence level). We tested trust in five conspiracy-loaded statements that, according to our qualitative assessment, were heavily shared at the time of the survey design: “Coronavirus is a bioweapon developed in the US to dominate the world”, “there is fake news about Coronavirus shared with the bad intent to make people ill”, “Coronavirus was artificially created to stop the ageing process”, “Coronavirus was artificially created in order to trigger a worldwide economic crisis”, “Coronavirus is a bioweapon developed in China to dominate the world”.

The results are striking. For these five conspiracy theories, the percentage of people declaring that they consider them “true or completely true” is, in order: 40,86%, 40,26% 28,1% 21,98% 19,57%. Equally relevant, the percentage of people declaring that “they cannot say” is (again, in order): 17,33%, 16,29%, 19,74%, 25,69%, 23,36%. Thirdly, no significant differences could be observed whatsoever according to socio-demographic variables, such as education, residence or gender. Put simply, in this particular situation, neither level or education, nor residence (urban/ rural) provides safe haven for these instances of polluted narratives (for a complete presentation of survey results and more preliminary interpretations, see Eurocomunicare Covid-19 Research Report available at <https://www.eurocomunicare.ro/what-romanians-think-about-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-public-opinion-survey/>).

5. Cognitive failure or leadership failure?

Drawing on qualitative assessments and survey research carried out in Romania during the Covid-19 pandemic, we argue that these local manifestations are generalizable at a more regional/ trans-national/ global level.

What is striking about the polluted narratives that we briefly assessed is how global they are in terms of content, and how local, even personalized they seem in terms of addressability and circulation. Most of the time, these seemingly similar narratives and rhetorical devices travel “below radar”, “below public scrutiny” via instantaneous private messaging (such as WhatsApp and Facebook private messaging), giving a most extreme impression of personalization (they are meant for you as a person, a relative or a friend, as member of a peer group).

Further research from a variety of countries is needed in order to empirically prove the instantaneous interconnectedness and flow of similar polluted narratives through hyper-personalized, “below-radar” private messaging means. Given their circulation along semi-private means, it is difficult to make assumptions or to come up with hard evidence about what specific actors drive these narratives. Their apparent success may be explained in terms of

imperfect cognitive mechanisms, structural flaws of the new digital ecosystem, interference of foreign actors seeking geopolitical advantages. Yes, it also reflects the absence of a meaningful global/ transnational crisis response, especially at the beginning of the health crisis. Across the Trans-Atlantic world, the first reflex of all countries pertaining to this world was national in nature (finding medical gear, closing borders, imposing travel bans). This left a communication void that was filled by a variety of actors and actions, with more or less explicit bad intentions. Sole focus on these foreign actors – be they politically, economically or commercially motivated – may create a blind spot, thus failing to acknowledge that the global/ trans-national penetration of these polluted narratives has taken advantage of pre-pandemic structural trends and weaknesses, among which globalization/ trans-nationalization of digital platforms in the absence of a meaningful global leadership figures prominently.

On April 1, the former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt tweeted that “only the virus is globalized”. Our analysis shows that not only the virus, but also the related conspiracies, appear to be globalized. Maybe this final realization that we have been exposed to rather similar polluted narratives that create the same disruptive effects (distrust, polarization, clashes big or small) is the seed for a renewed global solidarity in the information ecosystem and beyond.

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