

COVID-19 “INFODEMIC”: THE CASE OF THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

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Abstract. The coronavirus pandemic (SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19, 2019-nCoV), which, according to the Chinese office of the World Health Organization (WHO), began to spread from Wuhan no later than December 2019, now has secured its place among global security challenges. Scientists are trying to develop a vaccine against the 2019-nCoV virus, and WHO is helping them. According to the Nature magazine, in April 2020, more than 90 vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 were in the development of a number of pharmaceutical companies (for example, Moderna, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, GlaxoSmithKline) and research groups at universities around the world. Researchers tested various technologies, some of which had not previously been used in licensed vaccines. For example, creating a vaccine based on the DNA or RNA of a virus. These methods are very tempting because they can produce a vaccine in three months. But so far they have not proved their effectiveness.

In some countries, at first, there was significant progress in the fight against the pandemic COVID-19 (Italy, France, Spain), while in others (Brazil, Argentina, Peru) it reached monstrous proportions. However, as soon as the authorities began to weaken the quarantine regime (June-July 2020) and life began to return to a normal rhythm, new outbreaks of SARS-CoV-2 appeared with the beginning of autumn, marking the “second wave”. The WHO accepts that for 11 nations in Europe there is an especially hazardous circumstance, a huge flood, which, without control, will by and by place wellbeing frameworks in Europe on the edge of the pit. The situation was largely complicated by the Schengen rules, which regulated the abolition of border controls at internal borders and the resumption of the tourist season from July 1, 2020.

An “infodemic” is an overabundance of information that occurs during an COVID-19 epidemic. As it was mentioned in September 2020 by the WHO organization the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is the first pandemic in history wherein which technology and social media (LiveJournal, LiveInternet, Twitter, Facebook, ect.) are being utilized for an enormous scope to guard individuals, educated, gainful and associated a similar time, the innovation we depend on to

keep associated and educated is empowering and intensifying an infodemic that keeps on sabotaging the worldwide reaction and imperils measures to control the pandemic. During pandemic time, more so than in normal life, people need accurate and correct information to adapt their behaviour.

In this paper, we will try to outline some trends in the fight against the pandemic within the countries of the Iberian Peninsula, special attention will be paid to information coverage of this process and misinformation (fake news phenomenon). This makes it difficult for people to find reliable resources and reliable guidance when needed.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, Spain, Portugal, the Iberian Peninsula, Europe, EU, infodemic, fake news, WHO

Introduction

The 2020 pandemic of COVID-19 has been accompanied by a massive “infodemic” — “an overabundance of information, both online and offline”. It includes attempts to deliberately disseminate misinformation to undermine public health responses and advance an alternative agenda for groups of people or individuals (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic of COVID-19 besides evident physical illness and suffering has created the environment, which bred a multitude of falsehoods as truth has become a matter of life and death.

Misinformation can amplify humanity’s challenges. In such circumstances conspiracy theories, fake news are floating around. Some of this COVID-19-related “infodemic” rumors, stigma, and conspiracy theories circulating online, mainly in social media, may be potentially harmful. Fake news is regarded as one of the biggest threats to democracy, social justice, freedom of press and speech. It weakens the public’s trust in the government (Zhou, Zafarani, 2020).

Of course, the traditional challenges as the possibility of nuclear war or a new military conflict, international terrorism, growing migration, economic turmoil and social inequality have not disappeared anywhere, but they have slightly receded from the focus of the international community in 2020.

The Kingdom of Spain was one of the hardest-hit countries in EU during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As for the Portuguese Republic it suffered less during first wave (March-June 2020). On October 2020 Portugal is still only at the “beginning of the second wave” of infections while Spain is in the eye of the COVID-19 pandemic storm. Parallel to these two waves of the pandemic in both countries we observe a surge of fake news on COVID-19, which contradicted the official messages, in social networks. Especially, Facebook groups and WhatsApp and the consolidation of TV programs on mystery and esotericism.

The **objective** of this research — the phenomenon of fake news spreading in the context of COVID 19 infomedic in Spain and Portugal.

Fundamental Theories (literature review)

To understand how current media create fake news and how they spread across the globe we must examine the history of news media, how mass-media industry develop, then we must research the post-truth concept and the various technologies mass-media utilize. If we want to investigate the relationship between media and consciousness we should use the works of theorists that have tracked this relationship for decades. Following the works of Guy Debord (Debord, 1983), Michael Schudson (Schudson, 1989), Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980) this section of literature review examines the various ways that media affects both the individual and collective consciousness.

Our research also pays special attention to the political economy of media and communication. The study of political economy of the mass media continues to grow and evolve. We can name different bodies of work about political economy of media and communications. *Media and labour*. Communication and information have become a key part of this marketization process (Murdock, Wasko, 2007). James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (Curran, Gurevitch, 1996), Ben Bagdikian, (Bagdikian, 2000) argue that the mass media is the primary industrial and commercial organization that produces and distributes goods. *History of Social Media*. Emergence of Myspace in 2003–2004 made a revolution in the Internet and became popular with individual users (Allgaier, 2018). It was the most visited social networking site in the world from 2005 until early 2008. Myspace decidedly fell out of popular when the competing social networking site Facebook (appeared in 2004) overtook MySpace in April 2008 in the number of unique worldwide visitors.

We also have discussed media, communications, and fake news phenomenon specifically in relation to the public sphere and with *the concept of post-truth*. First this term was used in 1992 by Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in his article “A Government of Lies” (Tesich, 1992). Since Tesich’s 1992 article the term “post-truth” seems to have lain dormant until November 2016 (Schackmuth, 2018). And then according to Google Trends, the term hit its peak popularity. Next years (2017–2020) a myriad of scientific articles and monographs about post-truth appeared (Harsin, 2018; Hyvönen, 2018; Medran, 2017).

Definition

So far, no general definition of fake news has been provided. In addition, the definition of news is becoming more and more difficult because it ranges from the description of recent, interesting, and important events to the dramatic descriptions of novel or unusual things. (Zhou, Zafarani, 2020).

To work on identifying fake news in conditions of infodemic COVID-19, it is important to understand what fake news is and how it is characterized. According to Kai Shu et al. there are two key highlights of this definition: “authenticity and intent”. “First, fake news includes false information that can be verified as such. Second, fake news is created with dishonest intention to mislead consumers” (Shu, et al., 2017).

Methodology

Since the object of our research are events in the recent past (fake news during infodemic period in Portugal and Spain) rather than individuals, the success of the analysis hinges on finding a method of examining different historical events that is still firmly grounded in sociology. One useful method often used in the study of contentious episodes is the creation of event catalogs. (Tilly, 2002; Schackmuth, 2018).

Portugal. Portugal had the first confirmed cases of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on 2 March 2020. Order 3298-B/2020 of 13 March declared a situation of alert in Portugal (Despacho n.º 3298-B/2020). On 18 March the President of the Portuguese Republic Marcelo Sousa after gathering the State Council and after the approval of the Parliament, declared the state of emergency (Politica, 2020). Portugal lifted its state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic first wave on 2 May 2020 (it was renewed twice on April 2 and April 16). The Portuguese government publishes numerous legislative acts as a way to mitigate the impact of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 pandemic: in fiscal stimulus, in state-backed credit guarantees, related to social security payments. As of November 2020, Portugal had more than confirmed 156.940 infections and approximately 2704 deaths attributed to COVID-19 (Johns Hopkins University, 2020).

Spain. At the end of January 2020 the first coronavirus patient appeared (tourist from Germany). Spain has been one of the countries in EU hardest hit by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, with cases and deaths peaking in late March 2020 and early April 2020. Spain declared a nationwide ban on nonessential movement and closed its land borders on March 16, 2020 (Gobierno de Espania, 2020a). This situation of

alert anticipated the possibility of being extended, depending on the progression of the COVID-19 epidemic. The state of emergency ended on 21 June, Spain was registering 100 to 150 cases per day. In July-August 2020 daily counts of new cases and deaths have declined substantially since the first peak in April 2020.

The Spanish government enacted numerous emergency economic measures in response to the pandemic, including favorable loans and guarantees to help ensure companies' liquidity. For example, in March 2020 the Council of Ministers approved a royal decree with special measures that will allow up to 18.23 billion euros (Gobierno de Espania, 2020b).

A variant of SARS-CoV-2 (S:A222V) emerged in early summer 2020 in Spain, and has since spread to multiple European countries. "this variant, 20A.EU1, and a second variant 20A.EU2 with mutation S:S477N in the spike protein account for the majority of recent sequences in Europe" (Hodcroft E., et al., 2020). As of November 2020, 5, Spain had more than 1.225.913 confirmed infections and approximately 38 118 deaths attributed to COVID-19 (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020).

Findings

In Spain and Portugal there are two well-defined types of scientists: scientists from universities (Autonomous University of Barcelona; University of Lisbon) and scientists who work in public research organizations (Carlos III National Health Institute; Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal).

If scientists, who work in universities are allowed to publish their articles an in their blogs with full freedom of speech, it would be impossible for a government scientist from public research organizations to do the same. They are not allowed to publish/speak without the approval of managers who are appointed by the government in office.

This led to quite a significant situation in the COVID-19 crisis in Iberian peninsula: public trust is placed in the information that comes through social media, especially WhatsApp, as well as through "alternative" television and YouTube. We can track down types of "pandemic" fake news texts, reporting wrong information: pseudo-medical advices; folk or religious recipes; unjustified alarmism; fake official documents; conspiracy theories. This or that text type, however, contain signs of different groups, and also, changing, move from one to another. Besides, as infodemic develops, a new, as yet unknown new, types of texts.

In this regard, it should be noted that these text types are unequal in terms of the number and possible impact on the audience. In the situation of the COVID-19 infodemic, the most widespread (and with a high degree

of trust) types of texts are not fake official documents or conspiracy theories, but texts devoted to popular and pseudo-medical methods of protecting against infection and fighting the disease.

According to the obtained data, among all the analyzed information in Spanish and Portuguese mass media about COVID-19 crisis pseudo-medical methods of protecting against infection, consistently occupy the first five places in popularity (the largest number of such tips is found on Instagram and Facebook). “As Spanish public opinion continues not to trust official sources, WhatsApp messages and YouTube channels criticizing the government have become so relevant and prevalent that the government has considered using the Prosecutor’s Office to censor this alternative discourse in the social media” (Elías, Catalan-Matamoros 2020).

Causes of infodemic

Evolutionary psychologists, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and quantitative social media researchers are mainly engaged in research that answers the question of why people begin to spread rumors, conspiracy theories and fake news at the time of disasters and pandemic:

- Rumors, gossip, including pseudo-medical advices exchanging — is a natural process in human societies. This circulation of information helps to strengthen social bonds between the narrator and “his group” (Giardini, Conte, 2012);
- There is a relationship between the spread of rumors, fake news and emotional stability degree of the narrator. Field studies show that groups of people that feel deprived in their rights are much more prone to spreading rumors and conspiracy theories (Martel, Pennycook, Rand, 2020);
- There is also a relationship between the spread of rumors, fake news and growing distrust in the government institutions and official sources of information: “One important aspect of government (in Spain) efforts to tame public opinion around Coronavirus is its misuse of language, namely the presentation of a negative reality through positive metaphors” (Elías, Catalan-Matamoros, 2020);
- There is, however, no direct relationship between the narrator’s belief that the news presented is true and his readiness distribute the story. Sociologists show that people often spread information, the reliability of which is doubted. (Pennycook et al., 2020);
- Social experiments have shown that people with a high level of cognitive development correctly judge real news from fake and less inclined to distribute fake news;
- Additional aggravating circumstance accompanying all of the above, there are difficulties in rational assessment of ambiguous information inherent in the material part of the adult population.

Repeatedly by various researchers over the past 40 years an assumption was made that sounds metaphorically as follows: rumors and fake news can “infect” the person the same way as his body infects a virus, and thereby make a person change his behavior offline and online. That is why in the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic the WHO call infodemic “an enemy”.

According to the recommendations of many scientists, researchers and the WHO it is necessary to stop or slow down the spread of infodemic so that medical information reaches the public. However, the use of repressive measures, such as: blocking sources of information communication, media and social networks and messengers, the use of criminal penalties for spreading fake news do not consider recognized by the scientific and medical community as adequate measure. As such, measures are proposed educating the population the abilities to analyze incoming information: the emergence of portals dedicated to fake news analysis, the development the ability to highlight the main rhetorical strategies used in similar texts and the increasing of general level of media literacy among the population.

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