

## IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON PEOPLE IN THE PAST AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract.** If the Internet is teeming with resources, it is also a perfect vector for fake news. Google News, Facebook and Twitter indirectly participate in the spread of this misleading information. In this context, the term fake news or false information seems to have become a portmanteau word used to designate a heterogeneous set of inaccurate and/or misleading messages circulating within the public space. Disinformation is thus exacerbated by the way in which various audiences engage with it and amplify it, even unintentionally. The issue of disinformation within today's societies must be understood at the crossroads of human behavior (economic, ideological, political, playful motivations, etc. of those who create and disseminate erroneous information) and the technological and industrial specificities of new digital ecosystems. Within participatory platforms, the value of the content conveyed is now measured more in terms of potential for sharing, experience and connection, and less in terms of information. In this article, we will try to have a brief overview of fake news in the past, selecting a few examples from different eras as there are tons of examples of fake news throughout history, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as today's fake news is different from the past in the speed at which it spreads and how it is used to influence the public.

**Keywords:** *fake news, COVID-19, pandemic, health sector*

### Introduction

Fake news or false information can be propagated for different purposes. Some are intended to deceive the reader or influence their opinion on a particular topic. Others are fabricated with a catchy title to increase the number of visitors to a site. In recent years, the phenomenon of fake news has spread to the Web at the expense of Internet users. The phenomenon of disinformation is not new. Before the emergence of the problem of fake news, issues related to "trapped" content (propaganda, rumors, hoaxes, trolls, etc.) had attracted the attention of researchers (Lèbre, 2014; Froissart, 2002; Ploux, 2001; Bloch, 1999). This exploitation of manipulation through information is present as early as the Greek mythological stories, full of betrayals and lies aimed at influencing the actions of this god or that human. If the Internet is teeming with resources, it is also a perfect vector for fake news. Google News, Facebook and Twitter indirectly participate in the spread of this misleading information. In this context, the term fake news – like its French translations "infox" or "infaux", or neighboring terms e.g. "intox"—seems to have become a portmanteau word used to designate a heterogeneous set of inaccurate and/or misleading messages circulating within the public space: alternative facts, manipulated data, rumors and even unpleasant messages (Girel, 2020).

Disinformation is thus exacerbated by the way in which various audiences engage with it and amplify it, even unintentionally (Wardle, 2017). The issue of disinformation within today's societies must be understood at the crossroads of human behavior (economic, ideological, political, playful motivations, etc. of those who create and disseminate erroneous information (Larson, 2020) and the technological and industrial specificities of new digital ecosystems (Frau-Meigs, 2019). Within participatory

platforms, the value of the content conveyed is now measured more in terms of potential for sharing, experience and connection, and less in terms of information. In this paper we will try to get an overview on fake news in the past and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Discussion**

### ***Why did fake news appear?***

The first question that comes to mind is why does fake news appear? What can a person get by spreading false information? The answer is linked to two objectives that these professional liars have: to get money and discredit to promote their own interests. Fake news turns out to be a very lucrative business. There are sites that broadcast news out of the ordinary. The latter attract a lot of attention from readers. They have impressive titles and images. The emphasis is immediately on the morbid, the rest is just history. Money enters the account of those who produce this fake news for every click made by readers. Fake news also serves to apply the old Machiavellian principle: "Slander, slander... Something remains of slander." We see a lot of them in times of political campaigns. The information comes from unknown sources, accusing some of the candidates of vices, crimes or mistakes that are not true. These information are then clarified, but there is still a doubt. Sometimes these information are not even denied. Or when they are, people do not believe that the truth is the truth.

### ***Fake news typology***

Patrick Eveno, Professor Emeritus at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, President of the Observatory of Information Ethics, identifies seven types of content, from the least harmful to the most toxic: (1) "Satire", which has no malicious intent but can be misleading to uninformed or foreign audiences (Bautzman, 2017); (2) "Erroneous links", when the title or illustrations do not correspond to the content; (3) "Misleading content" means a misleading use of information to serve a subject or harm an individual; (4) "False contexts", when authentic information is used in an erroneous context; (5) "Misleading content", in which the source pretends to be authentic; (6) "Manipulated content" in which authentic content is tampered with for the purpose of deception; and (7) "Fabricated content", which is so-called new but totally false information, the intention of which is to harm (Bautzman, 2017).

### ***Fake news in history***

Fake news has always existed, or rather since information has existed. Among this fake news, some supposedly true lies have taken on extraordinary proportions in history. Fake news does not date from social networks. Fake news, hoax, propaganda, dirty rumors, and disinformation go back at least to Greco-Latin mythology. Around 2000 years ago, the Roman Republic was facing a civil war between Octavian, the adopted son of the great general Julius Caesar, and Mark Anthony, one of Caesar's most trusted commanders (Ringle, 2019). To win the war, Octavian knew he had to have the public on his side-winning important battles helped, but if the people didn't like him, he would not be a successful ruler. To get public backing, Octavian launched a 'fake news' war against Mark Anthony. He claimed Anthony, who was having an affair with Cleopatra, the Egyptian Queen, didn't respect traditional Roman values like faithfulness and

respect. Octavian also said he was unfit to hold office because he was always drunk. Octavian got his message to the public through poetry and short, snappy slogans printed on to coins. It was a bit like an ancient version of a politician today releasing a book or sending out a social media post. Octavian eventually won the war and became the first Emperor of Rome, ruling for over 40 years. In 1522, in Pre-election defamation in Rome, a new pope must be elected. Peter the Aretin was a kind of Italian poet protected by the Medici. These were counting on a cardinal whom they would have liked to see appointed pope in that election. The poet composed fierce sonnets on all the candidates except on the one who has the favors of his patrons. He glues them in the streets of Rome to discredit the competitors. Trump and Russia, are consider five centuries ahead. In the mid-1700s, the printing press, which was invented in the 15th century, helped to spread fake news about George II, who was the King of Great Britain and Ireland at the time. The King was facing a rebellion, and relied on being seen as a strong leader to make sure the rebellion didn't succeed.

Fake news about the King being ill was printed from sources on the side of the rebels. It didn't take long before these stories were seen by other printers who then republished them. This harmed the King's public image, and although the rebellion wasn't successful, showed how fake news can be used to try and change people's opinions. In 1888, in East London, information about the famous murderer Jack the Ripper was still eagerly awaited. Spreading false information about the serial killer has been a way for journalists to cultivate their careers and for kiosks to sell more newspapers. False and bizarre stories made headlines that mysteriously lacked factual elements. Fake news is the mirror of the collective consciousness, noted Bloch (1999). He said that fake news is born of collective representations that pre-exist its birth; it is only set in motion because imaginations are already prepared and are fermenting in a muted way. In times of crises, conflict and epidemics fake news designates a scapegoat and unleashes passions. Sometimes it even turns history upside down. And it has been going on for more than 2,500 years (Le Bras, 2018).

### ***Fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic***

On the side of the information world, especially social networks, the year 2020 was singular. Fake news, speculation, conspiracy theories, falsification of documents was the key words. A phenomenon that WHO has called as "infodemic", which rename as the virus of Fake news. It goes without saying that the appearance of the Coronavirus from the beginning of the year was accompanied by a wave of disinformation that spread faster than the virus itself, thus giving this epidemic a "trans-health" dimension. Indeed, several erroneous and sometimes even dangerous contents have circulated, at full speed, on the web and on private messaging applications misleading disturbed citizens and still in the dark. The spread of the SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) observed around the world since the beginning of 2020 has been accompanied by a wave of global misinformation. From the beginning of the epidemic – and long before it was declared a pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020 – several erroneous or misleading claims began to circulate on the internet and within private messaging. In the following, we propose a typology of disinformation about COVID-19 in order to better understand the phenomenon, as well as a reflection on its effects and issues.

### ***Origin of COV-19***

The theory that Covid-19 originated in a US laboratory in Ukraine is making the rounds of the Chinese web: Chinese social media platforms went up in flames as a conspiracy circulated claiming covid-19 was fabricated by a US laboratory in Ukraine. The origin of this fake news comes from an article published by the Global Times, a tabloid under the Chinese Communist Party, titled "British research reveals covid was manufactured by an American company." On Twitter's Chinese counterpart, Weibo, a thread about the article went viral: it was viewed by more than 1.67 billion users and generated 292,000 comments. The Global Times article postulates that the newspaper is "a little closer to the truth" about the origins of the coronavirus disease. According to it, the Russian military has "a lot of evidence in Ukraine" showing that laboratories affiliated with the United States are producing biological weapons. "Among the 36 laboratories in question, it was also found that the United States uses bats to study coronaviruses and has produced components for biological weapons," the Global Times writes. Picked up by 45 other Chinese media outlets, the Global Times article provides no documents or visual evidence to support its revelations.

### ***COVID-19: Does the virus come from a Chinese laboratory?***

Since January 2020, a virology laboratory in Wuhan has been persistently mentioned as a potential source of the epidemic, between false information and real assumptions of US intelligence. Several articles in the American press revive the debate about the origin of Sars-CoV-2. Since January, a virology laboratory in Wuhan has been persistently mentioned as a potential source of the epidemic, between false information and real assumptions of American intelligence. This question concerns various rumors and hypotheses that have been circulating since January about the origin of the new coronavirus (Sars-CoV-2) responsible for a pandemic whose starting point was the city of Wuhan. As early as the end of December 2019, local authorities designated a market in the city as the epicenter of the epidemic in China. "The evidence strongly suggests that the outbreak is associated with [human-animal] exposures at a seafood market in Wuhan," the World Health Organization said in mid-January. A few days later, however, a study published by the British medical journal *The Lancet* notes that the first patient listed would have no connection to the market, leaving open the question of the origin of the virus.

### ***Manufactured?***

A theory had spread widely on social networks, as early as January 2020: the virus would have been "manufactured" in this laboratory in Wuhan. The rumor evolved according to the resumption by Internet users until the diffusion, in early March, of a French video that ensures that the virus would have been created by the Institut Pasteur. These images go viral: in a few hours, they accumulate more than 3 million views and 100,000 shares. However, absolutely nothing accredits these theses. If the Wuhan Institute of Virology does have a P4 laboratory, the trail of a "manufactured" virus has been ruled out by the entire scientific literature on the subject.

### ***Wuhan coronavirus patented before the outbreak***

Several thousand publications on social networks evoke the existence of a patent for a coronavirus, filed before the date of the appearance of 2019-CoV. This tweet refers to a patent that does not concern the same strain of virus that is responsible for the

outbreak in China. This 2015 patent evokes the avian infectious bronchitis virus, a coronavirus that affects poultry.

### ***Health sector mostly affected by fake news***

Health is a field that lends itself well to the many excesses of information. It is not for nothing that nearly half of the fake news that circulates affects this area directly or indirectly. False information can circulate about each pathology or each health intervention. They are widely conveyed, and even prioritized by search engines: the first 5 answers to the Google query "cure cancer by" are fasting, plants, diet, positive thinking and hyperthermia. There is food for thought! The subject of vaccination is quite exemplary of the complexity of this subject. On the one hand, the scientific world has been strongly destabilized by the "Wakefield affair", named after this former British surgeon and researcher who published in 1998 in the prestigious journal *The Lancet* an article establishing a link between the MMR vaccine and a form of autism. This publication was widely used to sow doubt about vaccines in general, before it was demonstrated that its data had been falsified. In addition, it was revealed that Andrew Wakefield had close ties to anti-vaccine lobbies. His article was removed from the *Lancet* only in 2010 (after several years of investigation), and Wakefield was struck off the roll by the Council of the British Medical Association.

This case has led to mistrust, but it has also strongly questioned the notion of ethics and scientific integrity, which has led to important advances in terms of prevention and protection. Health-related topics are particularly sensitive as they deal with our intimacy, vulnerability to illness and death. It is therefore a breeding ground that can be very fertile to "hook" audiences and develop theses hoping for a wide dissemination, or even a real "contamination"; Thus, the followers of "post-truth", of conspiracy can provide dangerous answers to real problems, especially for people in vulnerable situations. This can lead to late diagnoses, or treatments not implemented, leading to real loss of chances of survival or cure (Abramowitz et al., 2017). Health is an important media marker. Health issues are of great interest to all audiences, all populations. The flowering of discourses and practices around well-being, global or holistic health responds to a societal demand, perhaps in reaction to a medicine that is perceived to be more and more specialized and increasingly dehumanized.

### ***Why such fake news about the Cov-19***

The lack of knowledge of certain aspects of the disease combined with the uncertainties related to its evolution, the potential remedies and the best methods to stop it, pushes citizens to look for reliable information (Hollowood and Mostrous, 2020). At every outbreak, we find people telling us that the virus is a punishment from God, or that it was created by the CIA or the KGB. Or that it was the pharmaceutical companies that manufactured the virus, to enrich themselves scandalously by selling us the vaccine. And all these theories are flourishing right now, as they had gone around the world in the 80s at the time of the appearance of AIDS. Even if at the time there was no internet. Conspiracy theory: In our societies, we are increasingly taking refuge in an imaginary conspiracy. This became the new criticism, considered more interesting than the truth. These interpretations are intended to be more complex and relevant than the official version or the facts themselves. There is also the revelation effect. Whoever carries a conspiracy theory will reveal the truth. He is the initiate in relation to the mass who

cannot see that he is being lied to. To adhere to a conspiracy theory is to adhere to a critical vision of the world around us, whether at the political or media level. Implicitly, the people who govern and inform us are liars.

The Internet allows a thought that was previously linked to small groups to become present and very visible. The Internet and social networks accelerate the dissemination process. There is a wave effect that is very difficult to stop. Just go to a search engine to find conspiracy sites that will give the impression that the dominant reading of an event is this. The user will have the feeling that the reading that denounces the plot is very important and shared by many people. The other difference is that today there are conspiracy professionals very present on the internet because it has become a massive tool for dissemination. The problem is that very often, by spreading a conspiracy theory on one's Twitter or Facebook account; it is a political or ideological discourse that is disseminated. The problem of fakes is particularly pronounced in troubled times, such as COVID-19 and a tense geopolitical situation-people make rash decisions based on unreliable information, and the consequences can be serious, even fatal. Society was not prepared for the resulting deluge of fakes and was not able to critically evaluate fake news on such a scale, a direct consequence of a polluted information environment. Consequently, misinformation can harm public order and health security. The influence of false information, whether potential or proven, is to be taken seriously because, on analysis, it even turns out that it can have a human cost. Actually, people who believe in false information would be less likely, for example, to follow health recommendations such as wearing a mask. In addition to information shared for the purpose of speculation to market supposedly miracle cures, some information can even harm the health of those who put it into practice.

## **Conclusion**

Health crises have not been spared from the phenomenon of fake news. The H1N1 epidemic in 2009, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014 or the vaccine debates have been fertile grounds for the spread of erroneous content (Abramowitz et al., 2017; Smallman, 2015). However, disinformation about Covid-19 seems to be an emblematic case because of the number and diversity of erroneous or inaccurate news conveyed, its scope and impacts; to the point that the neologism "infodemic" (formed from information and epidemic) was put forward on February 2, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO), to designate this situation and its dangers. In an open letter to socio-digital networks, published on 7 May 2020, more than a hundred doctors, nurses and health professionals are alarmed by the problem and call for systemic and immediate measures to stem the flow of health misinformation. Fear is a fertile ground for disinformation. This is how we have seen the fluorescence of conspiracy theories such as the one concerning the origin of the virus that would be produced by China. The explosion of digital information and communication technologies in society has clearly changed the pattern of information processing and this is how applications like Messenger have facilitated access to information, providing spaces for everyone to express ideas and information and circulate them in record time.

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## Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest with any parties involved with the study.

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