

From Pandemic to Infodemic

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Abstract: *In this article we will address the topic of fake news (Peters, 2018), which represents a real threat to society and could be considered a public health issue. The fake news campaign that accompanied public communications during the pandemic was named, by the World Health Organization (2020), infodemic, considering that its purpose was to generate panic and create social and economic problems, which would seriously overcome the initial public health problem - namely that of the pandemic -, to destabilize both states and global alliances. From an ethical point of view, we must notice the negative impact of infodemic, both on public health and on humanity in general; this can lead to deviations from democracy and human rights and, ultimately, to the dehumanization of society through the emphasis on social anxiety and the exacerbation of desocializing fears, which increase social distancing far beyond the limit of the physical distancing necessary to combat the pandemic.*

Keywords: *Pandemic; infodemic; Covid-19; personal freedoms; bioethics.*

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1. Introduction

Among the many texts that address the issue of infodemic during this period, we have chosen to discuss a text from the periodical *Daily News*, authored by Art Caplan and Kenneth Moch, entitled ‘Speculation in the Absence of Data that Can be Deadly’, published on April 28, 2020; the article is about speculation in the absence of data, which can be fatal. The authors refrain from treating the issue of infodemic from the perspective of intentional fake news, which aims to mislead the population; rather, they deal with involuntary fake news, which occurs as a result of violating the ethics of publication, as a consequence of the desire that some authors have to stand out by being the first to publish information considered scientific, but which is not properly verified (Moch & Caplan, 2020).

Adherence to the ethics of publishing and communicating science requires that a clear distinction be made between scientific results based on empirical data – obtained in the field or in a laboratory - and personal opinions, based on incomplete results or simple assumptions. The authors quoted above show that there are many people who want to take advantage of such moments, that have a maximum psychological load, in order to carry out an online PR campaign, personal brand promotions and to strengthen their personal image; they bring up the topic of the Coronavirus and the pandemic without taking into account the real information - which they often cannot understand, due to the lack of competencies in the field, be it medical or public health - without having concrete information about the evolution of the state of affairs and the pandemic; thus, they modify the real information and present it either incomplete or taken out of context, so as to support their own points of view.

The temptation to present fake news, but with a wide psychological impact, instead of certain data, but of lesser impact, comes from the desire to increase audience; this, of course, disrespects journalistic ethics, turning readers into means of increasing profits for mass-media organizations or for blogs. News are not presented anymore for the purpose of journalistic activity, as the Kantian categorical imperative would require (Kant, 2007; 2010).

2. The impact of fake news on public health

False information cover many aspects of the pandemic, from possible therapies to the number of people infected, of deaths, etc. Regarding the number of deaths, there is great uncertainty about the validity

of the diagnosis of death caused by Coronavirus infection, given that most of the deceased had comorbidities that would have caused their death in the immediate future (Andreiana, 2020). It is particularly important that the situation is presented as realistically and concretely as possible, at least the information provided by officials, which should be the most credible, although, even among officials, there are changes in views and public policies, such as the case of Great Britain, which initially adopted a health policy based on obtaining herd immunity, and following the alarmingly high increase in the number of infections, turned back on the initial decision and adopted the same policy as other countries, namely voluntary self-isolation, social distancing and so on.

The article quoted from the *Daily News* shows that, at this point, health policies and therapeutic plans are based on partial research and even on research articles proven to be unscientific. Approval for the emergency use of the already infamous hydroxychloroquine therapy was based on such articles. These articles are not based on scientific tests on the use of this substance in Coronavirus therapy, but on tests validating this substance for human use, which allows its pharmaceutical distribution. Regarding the therapeutic use of hydroxychloroquine in Coronavirus infection, it was based on an article by the French doctor Didier Raoult (2020), which was based on the approval he already had to use it for other diseases. The substance has enjoyed huge popularity (Gautret, 2020) due to its recommendation by the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, at a time when there was no scientifically accepted remedy for this disease. The fact that this substance has been clinically tested and is not dangerous for human use, combined with the need to reduce public pressure on medical systems due to lack of treatment, has caused the entire medical community - or much of it - to rally to the opinion of the President of the United States and to accept hydroxychloroquine treatment on the basis of preliminary studies and not irrefutable scientific evidence.

This type of public communication can be interpreted as fake news, as long as the idea its scientific validity as a therapy has been generalized in the media, when in fact it was actually based on simple assumptions formulated by experts, that were also based only on partial evidence. From an ethical point of view, we wonder if launching incomplete information in the public space can be accepted in order to limit public pressure on the health system and reduce public anxiety in the face of a major epidemic, in times when humanity has no other answer than total withdrawal and social distancing.

As for the development of new therapies and new vaccines, research starts from existing data, from identifying active molecules, but it takes time to move from theoretical research on active substances to clinical trials, first on animals, then on humans. At the beginning of the pandemic, most news promised vaccines in two to three months. Subsequently, the appearance of a life-saving vaccine was postponed for the fall of 2020, then for next year, and now there are rumors that a possible vaccine could be ready in about three years.

The development of a vaccine requires a number of steps, from testing the substance itself to testing it on human subjects - which cannot be done immediately after the active substance has been identified, unless it is already accepted for human use and the new tests aim at its effectiveness for combating new pathogen substances. In the case of new molecules, their faster testing on human subjects, even volunteers, means making research participants face additional risks, because the active molecule itself can produce harmful side effects. In addition, testing a vaccine on humans involves the voluntary infection of people who are not infected with the virus, based on assumptions about the vaccine's effectiveness in building immunity. This assumption must first be tested on cultures of cells and then on animals. Acceptance of a vaccine on the market in the first months after the outbreak of a new pathogen agent would mean a serious distancing from the principles of bioethics, which in return creates a crisis of bioethics without precedent and with particularly serious long-term effects, as it would open the way to pseudoscientific abuses in uncontrollable medical experiments.

Communicating the scientific reality in terms that the population, who is largely unfamiliar with the scientific language, can understand is, in our opinion, the best solution, as opposed to issuing pseudo-scientific opinions, but formulated with the weight of alleged expertise in the field. This is a matter of ethics, namely that we all have the right to express our opinions, which is related to freedom of expression, but we must distinguish between our own opinion and our scientific knowledge. Speaking of evidence-based practice, it is true that it includes our own professional experience, but we must maintain a critical attitude toward knowledge, that is to treat our own practice with the Popperian demands that circumscribe scientific knowledge (Popper, 2002).

Michel Foucault (1990) points out that scientific discourse is a discourse of power, but it is not the only discourse that matters in this global chorus of opinions, which ultimately seek to reach a consensus (Habermas, 1985). Any researcher would like his own opinions to be influential and to

be included in this global dialogue, in a position that allows him to represent an instance of social construction of reality for as many people as possible. Unfortunately, the experience of dialogue turns into one of simultaneous monologues, in which everyone speaks, but no one listens. Opinions are, as such, important and worth expressing when there is a chance to validate them on the basis of a Popperian science or, more often, a simple interpretive agreement with the other members of the community you belong to - as, unfortunately, happens in many areas, especially in politics.

However, there are situations in which decisions must be made much faster than the time we have for scientific studies. This is now the case regarding public policy decisions related to the closure of economic activities in order to achieve a certain protection of citizens from the current pandemic - through distancing, through self-isolation and so on. This decision cannot be based on experiments, because it is neither the time for random, clinical experiments nor is it ethically acceptable to conduct experiments on large populations of people who have not given, or would not normally give, their consent to be the subjects of large-scale social experiments. Public policies in this period, however, have a pronounced experimental character, at least as long as we are told that decisions are made depending on the evolution of events and society's response to them (Agerpres, 2020).

Public policy decisions from this pandemic period, which aim at balancing the threats to public health with those to sustainable development of the economy and the social environment. In fact, pandemics in human history have been analyzed from the perspective of the major changes they have brought in the evolution of humanity, in people's lifestyles and quality of life. A particularly interesting study published by Laura Spinney in *Nature* in October 2019, on the history of pandemics and their influence on social evolution, seems to foreshadow this moment of anthropological singularity generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which, at least for a while, has radically changed the concept of 'social', shifting from proximity to distance and from real to virtual.

Timothy Caulfield, also in an article in *Nature*, but published much more recently, on April 27, 2020, entitled, '*We are already tired of pseudoscience and Covid-19*', touches on the problem of unscientific treatments, such as cow urine, cocaine or herbal mixtures - some of which have no side effects - treatments that do not produce effects proven as beneficial in the case of Coronavirus or produce side effects that even worsen the health condition of the patient. Also in the category of pseudoscience are the so-called expert approaches that are related to conspiracy theories, such as presenting the

infection as a biological weapon, the impact of 5G technology on the spread of Coronavirus, the transmission of nanobots through vaccination against Covid-19, etc. All these accounts of so-called gurus of alternative medicine, who promote various substances, pills and practices that improve the immune system, constitute pseudoscience, which does not necessarily mean that they are false and cannot have positive results in some cases, but they are untested and the possible results may be completely random; however, it can also mean that we do not know the possible side effects, which could sometimes be particularly serious, especially when, due to belief in alternative theories, the patient refuses or is denied scientifically validated therapy by his or her relatives. As a scientifically validated therapy does not yet exist for Covid-19, official medicine has a symptomatic approach, trying viable therapies that are not scientifically tested, but are known not to cause harm.

From a bioethical point of view, this - the symptomatic treatment with drugs that are considered to be good - responds to the imperative not to leave the patient without treatment, but they are not very far from the limits of the pseudoscientific and unsystematic nature of therapy.

A number of herbal therapies, such as herbal medicine, acupuncture or homeopathy, could, for example, improve the body's overall immunity, which can be beneficial in some situations, including for patients with Covid-19: stimulating the body's immune response can lead to an improvement in the immune response to Covid-19 of people who resort to such remedies and, possibly, help them to experience mild or asymptomatic forms of the disease when they do become infected. This, however, cannot be attributed exclusively to alternative therapy, although its influence cannot be completely ruled out.

Much more serious for the health of patients are those treatments that prove to be completely harmful for Covid-19 infections, because they actually aggravate the health condition, thus discrediting both natural therapy and also allopathic, scientific therapy; this is because, at the level of public opinion, there is much emphasis placed on the emotional factor of the reported number of infections and deaths that are not associated with comorbidities, which in many cases were the actual cause of death, even if the Coronavirus infection hastened it.

As such, the use of pseudoscientific therapies, when they produce negative effects, such as aggravating the suffering of the patient, is a factor that can contribute to mortality; however, this mortality is considered to be a failure of scientific therapy, by often ignoring the contributing harmful effect of pseudoscientific practice. However, it is the person's right to adhere to

such natural therapies, especially when science does not offer any alternative solution and when their life and health are in great danger: when, for example, medical science tells them that they have a number of months left to live, and the person chooses to seek the aid of religious faith or some practices like phytotherapy, natural therapies, yoga, shamanic, which, in certain cases, have been presented as true or false, as being able to contribute to healing and prolonging life or not. The topic of debate is the right to hope, which should be granted to the patient only in conjunction with the right to be informed about their medical condition or to refuse to know (Brownsword & Wale, 2017).

3. Infodemic and the respect for human rights in a pandemic

Another article that we want to bring into the discussion is the one that was published on the *Calea Europeană.ro* website (Ion, 2020), according to which the UN has called upon countries to respect human rights in order to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe, whose effects would far outweigh the pandemic itself. Authorities in various states have proposed - and this has been done - the restriction of some websites that transmit such messages; this is practically a limitation of the right to expression. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, called on countries to respect the rule of law and not to take advantage of the Coronavirus pandemic, including by placing time limitation on exceptional crisis measures. Along with freedom of expression, other rights and freedoms are affected and, as the quoted article tells us, breaching such rights can cause incalculable damage to the efforts undertaken to combat the pandemic and its social-economic side effects. The UN expressed concern that some measures and rules introduced by the states refer to vaguely defined crimes, sometimes associated with severe punishments, fueling fears that they could be used to silence the media and democratic criticism, and to arrest opponents.

I previously stressed on the fact that it is unethical to present our own opinions as if they were universal truths, but it is just as unethical for states to limit the right to expression, effectively censoring publications that present an alternative to official opinions. It is likely that there will be ongoing misinformation through campaigns promoted by various states who are interested in destabilizing other states, which is what we already call hybrid warfare, which is based on messages that are destabilizing for public safety (Mackinnon, 2020; Scott, 2020). But the war against infodemic and *fake news* cannot be waged by increasing censorship, because once this tool of censorship is used, there will be a tendency to develop an undemocratic

society, which is no longer sensitive to the needs of citizens, but rather to the points of view of the authorities and their needs. Furthermore, even if this will not necessarily lead to a totalitarian society, the new society will at least be one that would condone authoritarian practices and where regimes of governance are privileged. There is a risk for the European society becoming even more permissive to authoritarian influences in politics than in its previous recent history; this is precisely because such authoritarian tendencies already existed before the pandemic, and the need for public safety and public health has already led to a number of limitations of fundamental freedoms, that citizens will accept and consider inevitable, even if they will not get used to them in the future.

Another example of a freedom that has been restricted during the pandemic is religious freedom, because it has not been possible to participate in religious services, even during the Easter holidays, and even practices related to common funeral rituals were restricted. The restriction of religious freedom under the rule of public health may be justified for a certain period, but the extension of this ban turns into a violation of freedoms, as long as alternative solutions can be found, involving, for example, social distancing - so often invoked during this period. Maintaining very strict restraint measures after ceasing the state of emergency for religious freedom and freedom of conscience can be a challenge for many people who emphasize these values.

I believe that wearing a mask is welcome and can save lives if it is properly made, i.e. in accordance with medical standards. There is a whole range of masks on the market that are useless in terms of Covid-19 protection requirements (McDonald, 2020; Somper, 2020). Wearing a mask limits freedom of expression, and then the reasons for this decision and also how long it is estimated that this limitation will last must be explained as clearly as possible. Wearing a mask is an intrusion of the state into private life, as long as we are required, in the name of public health, to wear a uniform. Wearing a mask becomes a significant social fact, as long as it is a social gesture that we make in an institutionalized way. To be justified, this institutionalization of the "anti-Covid uniform" must convince that the benefits to both the person and others - in terms of the number of infections avoided - outweigh inconveniences, including the fact that wearing a mask remains a symbol of social concealment and distancing, which will also mark the post-Covid period.

A society that wears masks will amplify the feeling of distrust of individuals in others, in people in the immediate vicinity, because in the collective subconscious, the idea of the mask is correlated with the idea of

the villain. Changing the social construct of a person wearing a mask - from one who has something to hide, who hides their true identity, to the idea of a person who is responsible for others, protecting their health and protecting themselves at the same time - could bring along a series of interpretive adrifts correlated with the idea of social hiding/non-hiding. There will also be interpretive adrifts in the social construction of one's identity, as facial representation is a special element in the construction of self-image. Wearing a mask is also a barrier between the person and the environment and, as such, wearing it can be perceived positively or negatively, depending on the representation of the environment as a threat or as a comforting element, bringing satisfaction. A society that wears masks for a long period of time can deviate towards an extremely individualistic society, which accentuates social distancing through its perceived symbol, the mask, integrated in the collective subconscious.

Social learning of a behavior - such as wearing a mask - can generate a deconstruction of freedoms, in the sense that a window of opportunity is generated - *overtone window* (Greer et al., 2018; Lehman, 2020; Talbot, 2019;) - on the social acceptability of the restriction of liberties, the reason invoked being public interest. In fact, the current pandemic opens many windows of opportunity regarding the virtualization of social space, the deconstruction of social solidarity and social distancing, which replaces sociability, by renouncing to freedom of expression, opinion and conscience. The overtone window is a moment of opportunity for a public policy, created in the context of the process of obtaining consensus and, respectively, of the interpretive adrift of a public policy theme. The restriction of civil liberties would have been absolutely unacceptable in a democratic state, had it not been for the current epidemiological context, which has deconstructed the universality of individual claims to freedom in favor of public safety. The social acceptability of the restriction of individual freedoms and human rights opens a window of opportunity for authoritarian practices that take place in special situations, such as the state of emergency, which may continue under the imperious of the same public security needs even after the end of the state of emergency and decreeing a state of alert or any other political crisis status.

Far be it from us to deny the need to maintain restrictive measures, even after the start of a gradual relaxation of self-isolation measures; however, the new measures can only be taken through public consultation and through normative instruments specific to parliamentary democracy. Derogations, with respect for human rights, should not be a window of

opportunity for authoritarian public policies and a political distancing from the obligation of decision-making transparency.

4. The window of opportunity – the infodemic impact

Another political problem in the situation of an open overtone window is the dissolution of the European Union (EU) and the undermining of the process of European unification, already begun by turning to the conservative socialist movements in some Eastern European states; this send signals of political distancing from the EU and closeness to Russia, followed by the Brexit exercise, and now by acknowledging the U.S.'s inability to ensure the achievement of fundamental values - such as freedom of movement - in extreme contexts. Conservative political discourse, with reference to the inefficiency of the EU and the need to return to the separate states, will capture this window of opportunity, emphasizing the political shift to the conservative right-wing political movements, as conditions rose for closing the windows of acceptability of liberal, European unification and progressive policies. These windows of opportunity can be opened gradually through communicative action and the construction of an interpretive adrift, in the sense of the acceptability of certain public policies. Hopefully, there is no overtone window agenda hiding behind the infodemic in terms of global political construction and the relocation of the poles of power; that is, by moving from a bipolar world, during the Cold War, or unipolar, to the period of US hegemony in international politics, towards a period of multipolarism, with state actors such as the USA, Russia and China, but also organizational, as is the case of the EU or NATO.

We cannot fail to acknowledge that such a window of opportunity is the accusation brought by both the USA and by European countries to the WHO, during the current pandemic, that they would manipulate the data regarding its evolution. Joseph Overton speaks of windows of opportunity for public policy, in the sense of opening them up to social acceptability, but the process can also be viewed in the opposite direction, in the sense of giving up obsolete values that once formed the basis of the European society; for example, religious values, undermined by the policy of social distancing, the campaign of fake news and the increased public hate, on the background of generalized fears and poor communication abilities in crisis situations of some institutional actors.

5. Conclusions

Maintaining long-term movement limitations can lead to the internalization of the limits of external spatiality and the featuring of the virtualization of social space, as a refuge from the real to the transdimensional. Moreover, limiting long-term interactions with others, by restricting travel distances and routes, as well as the non-random nature of spatial mobility, increases the degree of social rigidity and decreases the willingness of individuals to give up their communication intentions in order to socialize. Repeated awareness of intention leads to an increase in social pragmatism and a possible decrease in the playful nature of social interactions.

When the military ordinance is in force, in a period of emergency, the justifications of such measures on the basis of public health are legitimate, a certain constraint being necessary, including fines that sanction errors in the written statement or even the absence of such a written statement. The mere call to public health and disease prevention, as the purpose of these limitations of certain rights and intrusions into a person's private life, is not sufficient to justify the violation of the individual's freedom. These measures must be explained and correlated with similar measures in the other countries affected by the pandemic, at least with those in the European Union. If, for example, we talk about the US, where there are already over one million people infected, we find that in many states there are already public gatherings - which are supported by the President of the United States - on liberalizing restrictions and resuming economic activity, promoted because there are concerns about a major economic and social crisis. Compared to the situation in the US, the one in Romania may appear to public opinion as much less serious and, as such, the more severe measures can be considered unjustified in the absence of adequate communication. This communication must be free of contradictions between the various public influencers: the President, the prime minister, the Cabinet ministers.

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