

CORONAVIRUS: Infodemics and disinformation

Carme Colomina, Researcher, CIDOB
[@carmecolomina](#)



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The coronavirus information overload is riddled with fake news, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Distrust has become the new reality. Distrust of science and institutions, and of official narratives. No information vaccine currently exists to fight the viral force of the disinformation generated around a pandemic that has amplified the vulnerabilities of a physically and communicatively connected world. But who and what interests are hidden behind this disinformation?

Is COVID-19 a biological weapon made in the United States? What is the actual death toll since the pandemic began? Where were the photos of looted supermarkets really taken? Who drafts so much false information announcing exceptional measures long before they are contemplated? The coronavirus information we are overexposed to is riddled with fake news, rumours, pseudoscience and decontextualisation. In the very first weeks of the virus's spread, the World Health Organization launched a pilot programme called **EPI-WIN** that aims to ensure the veracity of the official information conveyed to the public. But no information vaccine currently exists to fight the viral force of uncertainty in a digital public sphere where **fake news** is 70% more likely to be retweeted than real news.

There is intentionality behind all disinformation. But who and what interests hide behind this manipulation in all its different forms? The answer is as varied as the disinformation itself:

Social alarm

The first consequence of disinformation is confusion. Contradictory messages produce confusion in general, but the purpose of the falsehood may range from pranks 2.0 that falsify official notices of educational institution closures long before they were contemplated to the **promotion of xenophobia** and the stigmatisation of specific communities, along with the bolstering of particular political agendas or arguments.

But the major difference between the coronavirus and other epidemics that changed the course of history is the ability to viralise the fear and confusion provoked. This has quickly and effectively amplified the vulnerabilities of a physically and communicatively connected world. As it fights to contain the virus on a global scale, the WHO has already declared us victims of the “infodemic”, an overload of unreliable information spreading rapidly through the population.

Political agendas

The coronavirus crisis has also been used to serve political agendas. Uninformed, scared, vulnerable or discontented societies can increase pressure on their governments. At the virus’s ground zero, from the very start, the Chinese government’s propaganda machine has had to deal with criticism of the official media sweeping the internet, bypassing censorship using keywords and protest videos.

In Europe, the EU’s slow reaction to the crisis is taking a toll. The immediate response of the far right in France, Germany and Italy was to demand stricter border controls. Marine Le Pen explicitly attacked “the religion” of a European Union of free movement and demanded the reinstatement of borders that protect citizens in any circumstances, meaning beyond the coronavirus.

Far-right political discourse has filled with links between immigration and health threats (Jarosław Kaczyński, Matteo Salvini and Javier Ortega Smith). The aim is to foment fear by feeding the idea of an external threat. The **unilateral suspension** of arrivals from Europe decreed by Donald Trump enshrines the isolation of an administration that is facing questions over its underestimation of the crisis. When read in combination with the electoral context, the political intentions of the narratives on the coronavirus become even clearer, and not just in the United States. In Poland, with presidential elections in two months’ time, the coronavirus has also become part of the campaign. There, the opposition is calling on the governing Law and Justice party to “reveal the truth about cases of coronavirus” in the country.

Geopolitical confrontation

Who is better equipped to deal with a pandemic: liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes able to impose drastic measures on their people? The history of coronavirus also includes doses of geopolitics, clashing political models and disruptive capacity.

In this context, in February the Trump administration denounced a number of **Russian disinformation** campaigns for spreading conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus. According to State Department sources published by Agence France-Press, in mid-January various Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts began spreading false theories about the outbreak. Among them were claims that COVID-19 is a US biological weapon in its trade war with China and that Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates owns the patent for the virus. The sources claim this viralisation was enacted by thousands of accounts managed by people – as opposed

to bots – that tweeted messages supported by information from Sputnik or RT. The spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was quick to call the accusations “fake”. Nevertheless, the same arguments were also aired by traditional Russian media and some of the country’s far-right leaders, and share similarities with **previous conspiracy theories** that propagated a history of hypothetical chemical weapons allegedly developed by the United States in a Georgian laboratory.

With the virus’s spread in a containment phase, China has begun to adjust its digital strategy in order to **repair its image**. Beijing now suggests that the virus may have originated in another country, praises governments that remained open to Chinese travellers, and lashes out at the most critical voices, accusing them of racism.

Economic effects

Stock markets are especially sensitive to perceptions and rumours and therefore to disinformation. Compelling examples exist of **criminal attempts** to use disinformation to bring about stock market crashes and profit from speculation. This time the panic is generalised. In the midst of information disorder and the economic costs of a crisis with no known expiry date, volatility is battering stock exchanges on both sides of the Atlantic. Even without hoaxes or manipulation, information saturation and the fact that coronavirus affects major centres of global industrial production made it inevitable that Covid-19 would cause markets to lose confidence. Because distrust has become the new reality. Distrust of science and institutions, and of official narratives.

Hoaxes existed before Twitter, but their capacity to penetrate has multiplied due not only to the amplifying power of social networks but to the willingness of many users to believe them and share them. We need to rebuild our defences, to restore the credibility of information and the sources that produce it. Public health recovery will also require restoring informational health.