

# PANDEMIC COMMUNICATION: FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES VERSUS TRUTH AND TRUST

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## Abstract

The concepts of fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories were studied by some of the worlds' most well-known researchers and their articles contain both common conclusions and different opinions. The rapid rise of social networks in the flow of interpersonal communication, coupled with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted more acutely than a decade ago the fierce confrontation between promoters of fake news and misinformation through conspiracy theories, on the one hand, and the defenders of truth, democracy and trust in state institutions, on the other hand. Both communication specialists and virologists and epidemiologists acknowledge the importance of stopping the flow of fake news and misinformation in the relationships between the administrative and sanitary authorities, on the one hand and the population, on the other hand, as a success factor in the fight against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Increasing the trust of the population in the administrative and sanitary authorities represents another success key in eradicating infodemic and the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *ampliganda, COVID-19, misinformation, infodemic, conspiracy theories.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories have always existed and will probably continue to exist in the foreseeable future. Peters, 2020 states that: "Conspiracy theories are and always have been part of human culture, and they will probably continue to emerge and find new followers." However, their names, forms of manifestation and scope were influenced by the context in which they were used.

Crisis represented a favouring factor for the development of the measure and intensity of the fake news flow, misinformation and conspiracy theories. Van der Linden et al., 2020 consider that: "COVID-19 conspiracies and rampant misinformation can adversely impact the effectiveness of containment strategies."

At the moment, based on a favourable apperceptive background, constituted by the existence of some antisystem movements such as BLM, Qanon (Nauman, 2020: „Powered by fear, anger and big tech's algorithms, the QAnon conspiracy movement has exploded from the US political fringe into the global mainstream during the pandemic."), Antifa and of some movements directed against the restrictions for stopping the COVID-19 pandemic, such as The Querdenker, The Liberty Convoy, Anti-Vax etc. and from the COVID-19 pandemic, fake news, misinformation and the conspiracy theories spread at the global level, giving birth to the infodemic, regarded as a second pandemic. On the other hand, the modern communication technology and artificial intelligence led to the appearance of ampliganda – a form of insidious manipulation, much more harmful than the other forms used so far.

In this article I shall present the conclusions of the relevant literature review and of my personal observations regarding fake news, misinformation and the conspiracy theories generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, forms of communication whose objective is to undermine the trust of the population in the state's institutions by mystifying and altering the truth regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the vaccines administered on people in order to stop the pandemic.

I shall also briefly analyse the roles of media and new media in generating and spreading and the effects produced by ampliganda and infodemic on individuals and human communities. In the end I shall present a forecast of the evolution of infodemic and some possible solution in order to reduce the size and intensity of the flow of fake news, misinformation and

conspiracy theories, solutions that might contribute to the eradication of the pandemic.

The ideas included in this article represent the result of the empirical analysis of literature review and of the compared analysed of news regarding the infodemic and the pandemic, broadcasted on social media, by written and audiovisual press institutions.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS REGARDING FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AMPLIGANDA AND INFODEMIC**

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The Council of Europe initiated many projects which aim at helping students better understand the meaning of the freedom of expression and the democratization of teaching in EU member states. As it is well-known, youngsters are the most vulnerable when it comes to fake news, misinformation and propaganda influencing. Following the amplification of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council of Europe developed and published a document dedicated to the training of students in order to recognize and protect themselves against fake news, misinformation and propaganda. Its content shows that “the terms ‘propaganda’, ‘misinformation’ and ‘fake news’ often overlap in meaning. They are used to refer to a range of ways in which sharing information causes harm, intentionally or unintentionally – usually in relation to the promotion of a particular moral or political cause or point of view.” (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2020)

### **Fake news**

Many books, articles and scientific studies were written about fake news and many more will continue to be written as this subject is topical. The opinions of the authors who approached this subject are partially convergent and partially divergent.

The majority of researchers agree that fake news have important negative effects on individuals and human communities, they are insidious and difficult to identify and that is why the flow of fake news has to be stopped, otherwise it shall erode democracy and people’s trust in state institutions. The specialists’ opinions differ

when it comes to the origins, definition, content, typology and the possible evolution of fake news.

Investigating the sources regarding the origin of fake news Das and Wasim reach the conclusion that “the term Fake News has become a global mainstream fad since the 2016 US presidential election yet the origin of the term can be traced back to a Harper’s Magazine article -‘Fake News and the Public’- published in 1925” (DAS & WASIM, 2021).

From the analysis of the relevant specialised literature when it comes to defining fake news and misinformation, we draw the conclusion that some authors do not make any distinction between them and that they regard them as synonyms. De Coninck et al., 2021: “We consider misinformation (or fake news) as “publishing wrong information without meaning to be wrong or having a political purpose in communicating false information,” eventually by including some “ingredients” from the negative influencing methods such as lie, propaganda and deceit. Hentea 2008 considers that “the Western society has put the equal mark between lying, misinformation, propaganda and subversion” (HENTEA 2008).

Mostly, fake news consists of a mixture between truth and lies which are accepted as being true by some of the people who receive it. Other times, fake news is completely false but it is argued with real facts which are reinterpreted in such a manner that it persuades us that the news launched in the public space is true. Example: the message according to which authorities want to establish control of the population and therefore suspend some of our individual rights and freedoms DiResta, 2021: “Noam Chomsky argued in a 1988 book that the U.S. government was “manufacturing consent” for its policies with the help of complicit news outlets, whose economic incentives and ties to elites led them to abdicate their responsibility to inform the public. [...]” They are trying to control us through quarantine and forbidding access to theatre halls, restaurants, stadiums, hotels etc. under the pretext that they do not want to create proper infection conditions with the SARS-CoV-2 virus (HARRIS, 2021; DACOMBE, 2021).

Approaching the issue of the typology of fake news Edson et al. consider that: “An examination of 34 academic articles that used the term “fake

news" between 2003 and 2017 resulted in a typology of types of fake news: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda." (EDSON et al., 2018)

Fake news was seen as a misinformation manner during the world wars. Prior, during the 1896 war between USA and Spain, fake news and the ones whose content could not be argued were called freak and this manner of broadcasting news was considered yellow journalism. (DAS & WASIM, 2021)

At present, there are various opinions about the news that should be regarded as fake news because of the politization and the usage of some publications in order to discredit political people and the products of some companies. Currently, as Pomerantsev said, "More information was supposed to mean mutual understanding across borders, but it has also made possible new and more subtle forms of subversion. We live in a world in which the means of manipulation have gone forth and multiplied, a world of dark ads, psy-ops, hacks, bots, soft facts, deep fakes, fake news, Putin, trolls, and Trump." (POMERANTSEV, 2020)

The multicriterial analysis of fake news shows that no news of this sort is entirely false and that no news which is regarded as real is entirely true. Potthast et. al., 2017: "however, practice shows fake news are hardly ever devoid of truth. More often, true facts are misconstrued using argumentative fallacies to influence a person's opinion."

The volume of the information offered by the media and the new media is huge and identifying every fake news represents an impossible mission for an individual. Therefore, new automated methods were invented and the old methods of text analysis were adapted in order to identify and classify fake news. Molina et al., 2021: "Given the enormity of the fabricated news problem, machine-based solutions seem inevitable for tackling the scope and speed with which it is created and disseminated, especially around the time of elections, disasters, crises, and other developing stories." That is why, in order to develop an algorithm meant to identify fake news, Molina et al. propose "eight categories of online content for the purpose of algorithm-based detection of "fake news:" real news, false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive

information, and citizen journalism." (MOLINA et al., 2021). The authors of the algorithms used to identify the news with a fake or manufactured content, warn us that the existing methods are useful for the types of news broadcasted so far, but that any change of form and content that the initiators of fake news shall bring might reduce the accuracy of the algorithms (MOLINA et al., 2021).

In conclusion, identifying and neutralizing the news with a potential harmful content represents a continuous process which opposes both the malefic people which generate fake news and the watchdogs.

### **Misinformation**

Misinformation represented a constant presence in the existence and functioning of human societies, although some authors credit Stalin as the author of the term 'Dezinformatsiya,' when he constituted a department in order to influence public opinion and to mislead his opponents.

The development of the communication means and methods facilitated the good side of the communication process, but it also contributed to the usage of these means in order to influence peoples' manner of thinking and of acting.

Amplifying misinformation represents a tendency associated with significant events which have important negative effects in peoples' emotional and physical plans, such as the humanitarian crises and catastrophes.

Himelein-Wachowiak et al. analysed the studies dedicated to the content of the messages spread by social media users during and following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the assault with automated guns on the Sandy Hook Elementary School (USA - 2012), from the time of the Sandy hurricane (2012), those referring to the attack with artisanal bombs during the Boston marathon (2013) and the 2013 Ebola pandemic and noticed that many of those messages contained "misinformation, rumours, and conspiracies" (HIMELEIN-WACHOWIAK et al., 2021).

Vladimir Volkoff - a former expert in the field of misinformation - defines this manner of communication as "a manipulation of public opinion with political purposes, using information treated by misappropriated means." (VOLKOFF, 2009). In his turn, Henri Pierre

Cathala – another important name from the field of communication and misinformation – considered that misinformation is “a form of subversive psychological aggression” (HENTEA, 2004; CATHALA, 1991).

According to D. Rushkoff, quoted by Alina Bârgăoanu, misinformation from the informational era has, besides its main goal of influencing masses in the direction desired by the initiator, the goal of erasing or of at least making it more difficult to identify the authentic news and of those who are not authentic, respectively of not allowing us to make the distinction between reality and fiction. BÂRGĂOANU, 2021: “We lose our ability to distinguish between real and not-real, between what is real and what is imaginary, between threat and conspiracy.”

At the request of the Directorate General for External Policies of the European Union, Colomina et al. published a study concerning *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*, which concluded: “The concept of disinformation refers to false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted intentionally to cause public harm or make a profit ... [also it is meant, a.n.] ... to confuse or manipulate citizens; create distrust in international norms, institutions or democratically agreed strategies; disrupt elections; or fuel disbelief in key challenges” (COLOMINA et al., 2021).

In conclusion, misinformation represents a method used in the process of communication through which the broadcasted messages are deliberately changed by an individual or group of people, with the purpose of its attitudes and actions according to the interests and the objectives planned by the initiator.

### The theories of conspiracy

Jamie King informs us that “the conspiracy theories are not new” and places a possible beginning for this communication manner during the time of the Roman emperor Nero, who came up with a complicated story which said that Rome was set on fire by Christians (KING, 2010).

Călin Hentea thinks that conspiracy theories represent “a collateral effect of the freedom of

expression, of making public communication more vulgar, of the ubiquity of the media and of exploiting the half erudite level of education to which large masses of people have access” (HENTEA 2008).

The definitions and the content of the conspiracy theories developed during the COVID-19 pandemic belonged to some well-known researchers and prestigious institutions. They are different but contain some common elements such as the fact that “they reject official explanations given by authorities, formulate an alternative truth as to why the pandemic is occurring right now and explain who is actually behind the outbreak of the disease” (PETERS, 2020). Also, the authors of the conspiracy theories on COVID-19 want us to believe that the events with a strong negative impact on the community belong to some hidden forces, which have bad intentions, respectively to “enable and accentuate distrust toward health professionals and authorities. As such, they can lead to violent radicalization and should be considered a public health issue” (LEONARD & PHILIPPE, 2021).

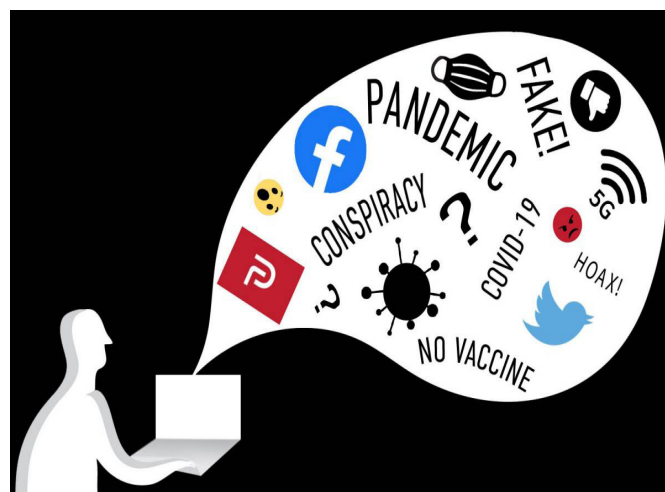


Fig. 1. How Did COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Get So Out of Control? (WANG et al., 2021)

### Infodemic

Simon and Camargo argued that infodemic is more a metaphor than a concept that was used for the first time by David J. Rothkopff in 2003, within an article published in *The Washington Post* “in the context of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)” (SIMON & CAMARGO, 2020).

Investigating whether fake news actually changes people's behaviour, Green Carla concluded that "fake news stories and others like them spread rapidly on social media during the early stages of the pandemic. The wave of misinformation was so great that the authorities coined a word for it: "infodemic" (GREEN, 2021).

Regarding infodemic there are different opinions of some well-known researchers from different fields of activity and of some companies. Most authors who studied the infodemic phenomenon generated as a collateral effect of the COVID-19 pandemic noticed the connection between the media and, especially, social networks and the flow of contradictory data regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Himelein-Wachowiak et al., 2021: "As the virus spread exponentially, so did its media coverage, resulting in a proliferation of conflicting information on social media platforms a so-called infodemic."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines infodemic as "an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. Infodemics can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people" (WHO, 2020a; WHO, 2020b).

Unlike WHO, which mainly highlights the quantity of information which abounds during this pandemic, generating misinformation, **Voinea Cristina considers that infodemia represents "a psycho-social pandemic because of social platforms and of the Internet in general, and it turns into infodemia - a sort of pandemic, we could say, only that its main vehicles are not viruses anymore, but fake, partial or unprecise information" (VOINEA, 2022).**



Fig. 2. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (WHO, 2020a)

Simon and Camargo suggest the necessity to renounce using the infodemic metaphor because there are some other terms like "false information", 'propaganda' or 'conspiracy theory' - terms that are well-recognised, empirically founded and reasonably precise." (SIMON & CAMARGO, 2020). Their suggestion is based on other authors' research that mentioned "risks of creating unhelpful and exaggerated public imaginaries as happened in earlier debates in other domains, such as digital campaigning [...] 'leading people to hold misperceptions (or false beliefs) [...] that may have downstream consequences for health, social harmony and political life'" (STARBIRD et al., 2020; SOUTHWELL et al., 2018).

Infodemia, which coexists with the COVID-19 pandemic, is regarded, by some communication experts, as a "second pandemic" (NAKOV et al., 2021). Therefore, it has to be stopped and this action is considered a compulsory condition of the eradication of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

The proportion of infodemic and the audience level achieved by misinformation via fake news and conspiracy theories is also explained by the favourable apperceptive background created by errors in the field of communication and the lacks in the field of decisional transparency, proved by some of the states' institutions both prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Ampliganda

Ampliganda is a word invented in order to explain the evolution of propaganda from the activity of influencing the population, usually "bottom up," meaning for the authorities to the citizens, via mass media, to the current situation when citizens decided not be represent a target for propaganda anymore, but to become "an active participant in creating and selectively amplifying narratives that shape realities".

Well-known authors who approached the field of digital propaganda named this phenomenon "ampliganda, reversed propaganda, vital propaganda, misinformation 2.0, memetic war" (BĂRGĂOANU, 2021)

Referring to influencing the population in the digital era, Rogers et al. note that "Digital age propaganda represents a new form of public manipulation with endless possibilities." (ROGERS et al., 2019)

According D. Rushkoff, ampliganda is “the result of a system in which the truth was relocated from the figure of authority to the charismatic leader capable of mobilizing the elements of personal or ideological identity, which their successors care a great deal of” (BÂRGĂOANU, 2021.)

### The favourable apperceptive background

Most studies dedicated to infodemic highlight the favourable apperceptive background which facilitated the amplification of the dimension and of the intensity of the flaw of fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories. The most important characteristics of this apperceptive background consist in:

- the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic, since it is known that crisis periods stimulate de flaw of fake news and misinformation (XU & LIU, 2021); Luo et al., 2020: “It is well known that every outbreak is accompanied by an amount of misinformation. [...] COVID-19 outbreak has generated a tsunami of hot ambiguous topics since the end of January 2020.”

- prior conspiracy theories: those who believed in some of the theories of conspiracy are inclined to also accept the ones referring to the COVID-19 pandemic; Wang et al., 2021: “Even before the emergence of COVID-19, American culture provided an ideal breeding ground for conspiracy theories.”; Ullahh et al., 2021: “A study in 2012 based on population surveys or registers from the US, European Union, New Zealand, and Australia, found that 20–30% individuals were categorized as being hesitant concerning about vaccination.” Bloodworth, 2021: “The single best predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in another conspiracy theory: sometimes called “crank magnetism,” one form of quackery tends to attract another like a magnet.” Peters, 2020: “Many of the recent theories about coronavirus are, in several ways, reminiscent of conspiracy theories we have seen in the past during major disease outbreaks.”

- lack of trust in authorities (PIERRE, 2020)
- the curiosity and the desire to discover the truth (Ferguson and Kelsey-Sugg, 2022: “In the process of striving to find answers, and to address our innate curiosity, people ‘can find consolation in conspiracy theories’”);

- the content of fake news messages addresses emotions and affects (the authors of the messages allow the addressees to believe that they discovered the hidden content of some malevolent and unseen authors). Dacombe, 2021: “conspiracy theorists believe they have discovered the hidden truth that world events result from the deliberate actions of unseen, malevolent actors. [...] This might mean blaming the emergence of COVID-19 on “big pharma” or believing that social distancing measures form part of an attempt by a hidden “world government” to restrict civil liberties”).

- the partially faulty communication of authorities. Mihăescu, 2021 says that: “Authorities have radically changed the communication on coronavirus, alongside the alarming increase in deaths and infections. If a month ago, the government and the president assured that the situation is under control, now the communication strategy is based on the feeling of fear.”

- contradictory decisions and the insufficient transparency when it comes to the measures of the authorities in order to stop the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Janicek, 2022: “The Czech Republic’s new government has dismissed the previous government’s plan to require older adults and people in some professions to get vaccinated against the coronavirus.”;

- isolation and social distancing makes some people became distrustful, suspicious and helpless in front of the wave of fake news and theories of conspiracy;

- the fear, uncertainty about the future, insecurity, frustrations, a feeling of marginalization (DOUGLAS, 2021);

- the involvement of some well-known doctors in blaming the anti-COVID-19 measures. Villareal, 2022: “Professor Ehud Qimron, the head of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at *Tel Aviv University*, slammed the global management of the Wuhan coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, saying that it was a shameful disaster driven by false propaganda.”;

- the involvement of some personalities from different fields of activity in blaming the anti-COVID-19 measures. Boată, 2020: “while politicians, celebrities and other important public figures were responsible for the spread of 20% of fake news regarding the new coronavirus, their posts represented 69% of the users’ engagement

in social media"; Wong, 2022: "Eric Clapton is doubling down on his criticisms of COVID-19 safety protocols, arguing that those who are getting vaccinated are victims of "subliminal advertising" by pharmaceutical companies on social media." Stern, 2022: „Over the weekend, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the world’s leading (translation: most dangerous) anti-vax conspiracy theorist, was one of many kooky speakers railing against COVID vaccines and mandates at a "Defeat the Mandates" rally in Washington, D.C."

- the contradictory messages of authorities and of some personalities, including from the fields of epidemiology and virology; Villareal, 2022: "In the U.S., the majority of the Supreme Court seemed to be leaning toward blocking the White House’s pandemic strategies as they expressed their scepticism of the Biden administration’s legal power to mandate large employers to require their employees to get vaccinated or undergo frequent testing." Osterholm and Olshaker, 2022: "U.S. President Joe Biden’s declaration of imminent victory over the virus in July 2021 seems hubristically premature. The emergence of the substantially more infectious Omicron variant has led to the deaths of upward of 1,800 Americans each day and underlined the great uncertainty of this pandemic."; Gortler, 2022: "Remember when the White House and Dr. Anthony Fauci told us that, once we all took vaccines, we would all soon return to "normal"? Well, that’s not going to happen." Ullah et al., 2021 "Controversies on vaccine safety, that circulate vigorously in news headlines, talk shows, and popular articles also upsurge the vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccine behaviour in the community";

- the insufficient scientific knowledge regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the measures meant to stop its spread was exploited by the authors of the conspiracy theories who fabricated simple, but false explanations, in which there is a kernel of truth and in which the guilty ones are presented; Peters, 2020: "Conspiracy theories can be seen as a way of dealing with a crisis by providing a simple explanation for upheavals and assigning blame.";

- the easy access to information via Internet and social networks as well as the increased capacity of social networks to broadcast messages;

Boată, 2020: "According to a study published in 2018 in Science Magazine, fake news spread approximately 10 times faster on social media than on the authentic ones."

- the messenger RNA technology was no longer used in the production of vaccines

- the reciprocal accusations between China and the USA on the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus;

- religious beliefs; Saleem, 2020: "Many people also believe that it is from God as a punishment.";

### **3. MEANS AND METHODS OF SPREADING FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION THROUGH THEORIES OF CONSPIRACY**

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Most authors view social networks as the main means of spreading fake news and misinformation through theories of conspiracy. Nauman, 2020: "ISD’s analysis of QAnon-related posts on major social media platforms showed explosive growth between March and June this year -- nearly 175 percent on Facebook, 77.1 percent on Instagram, and 63.7 percent on Twitter [...] While QAnon content has remained most dominant in the United States, researchers have found related social media content originating from around 70 countries." Pool et al., 2021: "The main digital environment that can be misused and may amplify infodemic is social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. For example, a study on a sample of COVID-19 misinformation has revealed social media platforms as the main source (88%) of infodemic." This role of social networks is justified by: the unprecedented development of communication technologies, the facile accessibility to social networks for any smartphone user, the capacity to rapidly broadcast data and images in a short period of time and to a large number of people around the globe. Pool et al., 2021; George et al., 2021: "FN [fake news, a.n.] is an important contemporary concern, primarily due to the technological affordances of social networks, which allow individuals to act not only as news consumers, but also as news creators (through first-hand accounts) and news propagators (by sharing or interacting with news)."

The vehicle range for spreading fake news and conspiracy theories is completed by the classical tabloid publications and by those that do not uphold the ethical code of journalists and do not verify the news that they broadcast or, because they want to gain rating at any cost, they also publish partially correct or unverified news. Boată, 2020: "the media virus is formed from a mixture of fake news, partially correct news and from the need for sensational and audience at any cost."

Citizen journalists, bloggers and vloggers also play a role in the spread of fake news and of the theories of conspiracy. Das & Wasim, 2021: "Digital media and citizen journalism has escalated the infiltration of fake news attempting to create a post truth society." They broadcast of unverified news and images but some of them are convinced that the fake news and the conspiracy theories that they broadcast are real.

Artificial intelligence substantially contributes to amplifying the flaw of fake news and conspiracy theories through automated accounts (bots) and the troll farms.

The initiators of misinformation edit various types of newspaper dedicated to this purpose that they call "truth papers" and they broadcast them for free. Dacombe, 2021: "I've been exploring the offline space through an analysis of the Light, a monthly newspaper (and self-described "truthpaper") delivered free of charge across the UK. It provides sceptical coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and we've concluded that a significant proportion of its content can be seen as conspiracist in nature."

Also, the manifests introduced in citizen's P.O. boxes have the role of diversifying the means through which fake news and conspiracy theories are being presented. Cockerel, 2021: "Londoners found conspiracy leaflets being pushed through their doors, advocating against the vaccine and in favour of the government dropping COVID rules altogether."

#### **4. THE EFFECTS OF FAKE NEWS, OF MISINFORMATION AND OF THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

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The "consumers" of fake news and of the theories of conspiracy, subjected daily to

misinformation via an authentic "media bombardment" suffer consequences on both the psychological and behavioural background,

At the individual level, the consequences on the human psyche are quite numerous and with a medium and long-term impact. The most well-known effects are:

- fear of the medical staff and hospitals, for the COVID vaccine, towards other people, especially the unknown ones, who could represent sources of contamination, towards the evolution of their own political, social and financial situation and that of the community;

- suspicion regarding other people. Taunton, 2020: "One impact is that, the less contact we have with other people, the more we become suspicious of other people. This can make others more defensive and lead to a vicious spiral where isolation leads to suspicion, which begets defensiveness, which reinforces the suspicion and leads to further isolation as a self-fulfilling prophecy.";

- lack of trust in the state's sanitary and administrative institutions, in official people, in the specialists from the medical and political field, in the traditional media (CHOPRA, 2020; WILKINS, 2020; LEONARD & PHILIPPE, 2021);

- aversion to strangers – people of another ethnicity, race or religion (MANSOURI, 2020) says that COVID 19 highlighted "several core areas of impact which threaten intercultural understanding during the pandemic – from the rise of xenophobia and ethno-cultural racism to increases in gender-based violence."), to migrants, to the personalities accused by the theories of conspiracy that they lie at the core of the pandemic (RMIT ABC FACT CHECK, 2020), to the 5 G technology, seen as the transmission vehicle of the SARS-CoV-2; De Coninck, 2021: "in reaction to the conspiracy theories that claim that 5G cellular network is the cause of the disease, over 200 incidents have been reported of attacks against telecom workers in the U.K. and numerous mobile telecom masts were set on fire in the Netherlands;

- uncertainty, the feeling of losing control over their own existence, anxiety and stress; Bloodworth, 2021: "The negative emotions that constitute the psychological origins of belief in conspiracy theories include anxiety, uncertainty, or the feeling that one lacks control."



At an individual level, but also in the behavioural plan, the human beings who believed in misinformation and in conspiracy theories presented some manifestations characterised by:

- reticence, up to the refusal of getting vaccinated, of accepting to be admitted to hospital and to accept the anti-COVID-19 treatments. A study conducted by Kayikcioglu et al. showed that "Most of the study population (73.5%) reported that they would not go to a hospital even if they had a severe complaint during the COVID-19 outbreak [...] due to fear of contracting the coronavirus in health care services." (KAYIKCIOGLU et al., 2020);

- the refusal to comply with the sanitary and administrative measures established by the state's authorised institutions to stop the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Dacombe, 2021: "belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a lack of confidence in steps aimed at addressing the pandemic and risky health behaviours and that conspiracy adherents are more likely to refuse to socially distance, wear a mask or get vaccinated";

- the rebroadcasting of fake news and of the conspiracy theories through the formation of some groups with similar convictions, who act as "echo chambers." (LEONARD & PHILIPPE, 2021);

- taking part in protest demonstrations against the restrictive measures imposed by the authorities. Furstenau, 2021: "The Querdenker (lateral thinkers) include pandemic sceptics, anti-vaxxers and anti-lockdown protesters. They claim the COVID-19 pandemic and the federal and regional laws aimed at halting the spread of the virus, infringe on citizens' liberties. Now, protesters regularly take to the streets in cities across the country";

- aggression on the medical staff ("Healthcare workers (HCWs) across the globe have met tremendous challenges during the COVID-19. [...] an increase in incidents of violence and aggression against HCWs was seen in Pakistan and globally." (BHATTI et al., 2021)) and of some citizens belonging to racial, ethnic and religious minorities (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2020);

- participation in the destruction of some infrastructural elements belonging to the 5 G technology;

- the initiators of fake news and of the conspiracy theories managed to stimulate political extremism and to determine the formation of some groups of people who try to undermine democracy.

Misinformation through fake news and the conspiracy theories destroyed the faith of many citizens in the administrative and sanitary authorities by introducing doubt regarding the efficiency of the measures meant to stop the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, misinformation through fake news and conspiracy theories managed to determine a relatively important percentage of the states' population to deny the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, despite the obvious.

## **5. ESTIMATING THE EVOLUTION OF INFODEMIC AND OF THE PANDEMIC**

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There are various uncertainties regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Luo, 2021: "However, forecasting future developments in the pandemic is fundamentally challenged by the innate uncertainty rooted in many "unknown unknowns," not just about the contagious virus itself but also about the intertwined human, social, and political factors, which co-evolve and keep the future of the pandemic open-ended." Therefore, the prediction of the evolution of infodemic and of the pandemic is quite difficult. Osterholm and Olshaker, 2022 state that: "the long-term view of how societies return to a version of normalcy remains murkier. The evolution of COVID-19 has proved more difficult to predict than past pandemic diseases [...] Nobody can say with any certainty when and how the pandemic will end." At the same time, the negative influence of infodemic amplifies the difficulty of eradicating the pandemic. Pomerantsev, 2020: "Today bots, trolls and cyborgs could create the simulation of a climate of opinion, which was more insidious, more all-enveloping than the old broadcast media – as it wormed its way into the feeds on your phone and you couldn't tell whether it was coming from a friend or propagandist."

The publishing of a large number of articles on COVID-19 (Else, 2020: "Scientists published

well over 100,000 articles about the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. By one count, from the Dimensions database, they might even have passed 200,000 by early December. (Estimates differ depending on search terms, database coverage and definitions of a scientific article.) and of many millions of news which spread the conspiracy theories (Pomerantsev, 2020: "Researchers at Harvard have shown how the Chinese government posts 448m social media comments a year, the aim of which is not to engage but to distract") contribute to the over-information of the population and to inducing the inability to distinguish between true, false and, respectively fabricated, news.

In this context, we appreciate that there are three main scenarios regarding the development of infodemic and of the pandemic because they influence (stimulate) reciprocally:

- **the optimist scenario:** the pandemic will end shortly by adapting and improving the vaccines and the anti-COVID-19 treatments and the regress of the pandemic will also induce the considerable reduction of the flow of fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories (infodemic);

- **the realist scenario:** we shall learn to live with the virus which will become less virulent, similar to flue, and the flow of fake news and conspiracy theories (infodemic) will decrease as the trust of the population in the states' institutions will increase Osterholm and Olshaker, 2021 consider that: "This coronavirus may well become endemic - much like influenza, which spreads each winter, sometimes with a new variant that reaches epidemic or pandemic proportions before it eventually attenuates into a less fearsome seasonal strain.";

- **the pessimist scenario:** the SARS-CoV-2 virus shall suffer from numerous mutations and the vaccines and the anti-COVID-19 treatments will present insufficient efficiency in order to eradicate the pandemic, which shall continue for a much longer period of time than we expected. Gortler, 2022: "This virus will be with us for decades, just as the flu has persisted despite the availability of vaccines."; Luo, 2021: "The viruses constantly evolve and change through mutations and multiple COVID-19 variants have been emerging in the UK, South Africa, and other

regions."; Osterholm and Olshaker, 2021: the "dangerous mutations [of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a.n.] could prolong the pandemic, extending all the concomitant suffering, hospitalization, death, and economic disruption of the past year"; Therefore, the infodemic will gain a high amplitude and intensity, stimulating the population's lack of trust in the states' institutions.

## **6. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO DIMINISH THE AMPLITUDE AND THE INTENSITY OF THE FLAW OF FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION THROUGH CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

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It is very difficult to stop the flaw of fake news and misinformation through conspiracy theories because the number of anti-vaxxers is continuously increasing. Despite all this, we believe that the stopping of infodemic consists in regaining the trust of the population in the states' sanitary and administrative institutions alongside the responsible implication of the media and of the citizens in this activity through:

- the correct information of the citizens regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the measures taken to eradicate it. Boată, 2020 considers that: "the correct and complete information represents the proper vaccine against the media virus. It is important not to induce panic in the SARS or MERS situations.";

- the stimulation of the citizen's trust in their own possibilities of defending themselves and of protecting the other members of their community against misinformation through fake news and conspiracy theories;

- the organisation of some persuasive demonstrative activities meant to identify and eliminate fake news and conspiracy theories to which individuals actively take part in and not as mere spectators;

- involving the citizens in voluntary activities with the goal of gaining proper knowledge and skills so that they become able to protect themselves against fake news and conspiracy theories;

- dismantling misinformation by passing on personal experiences to family members, friends and acquaintances, knowing that many people

tend to believe what their acquaintances and friends tell them, let alone in the messages of state institutions;

- the eradication of amplification, infodemic and the COVID-19 pandemic has to be achieved by a single coordinator; the sole responsibility of the coordinator of the official communications has to be to eliminate the discrepancies between messages and the dimensioning of the proportion and of the intensity of the informational flaw, so that it does not have any unintentional negative effects, such as over-information, which might make the citizens less attentive to official communications or even to offer them the suspicion that authorities have other intentions than the ones they declared;

- the elimination of the suspicions that authorities hide the truth from us by increasing decision-making transparency; the sanitary and the administrative measures meant to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have to be persuasively supported so that they are credible and accepted by the population;

- the improvement of the content, methods and means of official communication with the population, together with their continuous adaptation to the evolution of the situation and to the demands of the citizens. The content of the messages of the authorities sent to the citizens must be constantly harmonized with the moods of the population, so as to be adapted to the possible changes of perception, but also to answer the new questions generated by the continuous disinformation actions. Also, in achieving the goal of preserving the trust of the population in the states' institutions it is very important for the messages to be coherent, so as not to exist any contradictory opinions among communicators. Another condition in order to avoid the loss of public confidence in the state's institutions is the investment in the responsibility to send messages to the population with recognized health and leadership skills, but who also have an undoubted moral probity. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid situations in which the politicians and the representatives of state administrative institutions transmit recommendations and measures in the medical field, respectively for medical specialists to transmit recommendations and administrative

measures to reduce the number of people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus;

- people with important positions who violated the rules of conduct during the pandemic should no longer be allowed to send messages to the population requesting compliance with those rules that they have violated; those who violated the rules of conduct during the pandemic must be punished, even if they are officials, because no one is above the law and such a measure will greatly contribute to increasing the population's trust in the state's authorities;

- the improvement of the cooperation between authorities and both the media and new media;

- the improvement of the algorithms used to identify fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories, the warning and the protection of the population against infodemic; van der Linden et al., 2020 argue that: "Because misinformation spreads through networks much like a real virus "infecting its host" and rapidly transmitting falsehoods from one mind to another, the natural antidote is a psychological vaccine against fake news";

- the improvement of the vaccines and of the anti-COVID-19 treatments;

- the avoidance of speculations and promises which are not supported by verifiable facts regarding the eradication of the pandemic, for example the "zero COVID-19" strategy, which was launched by the Chinese authorities (Morrison et al., 2022).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

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The national and international media space is oversaturated by conspiracy theories (Naidin, 2020) and fake news, meant to manipulate the international community and to hide the incompetence, carelessness, lack of professionalism, corruption and greed of some governors, business men, banks or drug producers.

The flaw of fake news and misinformation through conspiracy theories reached global dimensions and generated a second pandemic – the infodemic.

The proportion and the intensity of infodemic were stimulated on the existent favourable apperceptive background, also prior during the pandemic period, and also by the incredible

performances of the digital communication means and methods.

It is difficult to estimate the evolution of infodemic and of the pandemic at this moment due to the various uncertainties regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus (CHAN et al., 2020) and the negative influence that the authors of this type of fake news and misinformation exert through conspiracy theories. This situation has to represent a strong stimulus for the expansion of scientific research with the purpose of improving the vaccines and the treatments against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, together with the identification and stopping of the activity of the sources and vectors of influence which propagate the infodemic and ampliganda. (DE CONINCK et al., 2021 consider that: "While the world is fighting a pandemic, it is also fighting an infodemic in which falsehoods tend to spread faster, further, and more easily than truths."

One of the most important solutions of stopping the infodemic and the pandemic consists in re-establishing the trust of the population in the media and in the state's authorities which have to avoid fuelling the suspicions that they are hiding the truth from us. To this end, the authorities must show decisional transparency, friendly, timely and fair communication, adapted to the requirements of the population and which must eliminate contradictions and promises without factual coverage. Leonard and Phillipe, 2021 conclude that: "There is a consensus among professionals that engaging the population and genuinely listening to their needs, perceptions, and concerns greatly helps to ensure the efficacy of sanitary measures during disease outbreaks."

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