

VIRTUAL PANDEMIC. IS INTERNET VIRUS MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE REAL ONE?

We cannot say that we have won with the coronavirus already, but we still need to fight with the other virus - the virus in the information area. The last months proved that it could be even more harmful than the real one and cause a lot of damages likewise the COVID-19 virus.

Even though Europe had a lot of time to prepare for the pandemic, we wasted this time by passively observing the development of situation in China and how the healthcare, business, education reacted. Similarly, we did not prepare for the information attacks either. The outbreak of pandemic made it natural that societies were looking for information, not only how to protect from the coronavirus but also about the origin of the virus.

Digital 2020 report shows that Poles spend 6 hours and 26 minutes per day on using the Internet, including 2 hours in social media, that is pretty like the world average. Considering the time, which Poles spend online and the important role of social media in searching for the information, the quality of the distributed information in an infosphere is critical. The pandemic time brought uncertainty and fear for health, job or life quality and was a fertile ground for disinformation actors to wreak havoc.

Why is it so important?

Firstly, disinformation linked with coronavirus increases the fear of a new virus and hinders the ability to apply preventive measures logically and rationally to ensure the life quality. The illogical fear determined by disinformation also increases the possibility of exaggerating. Slowly, with the lasting pandemic it was not difficult to identify persons who ostentatiously ignored the government's restrictions and also people who decided to take all the possible measures to prevent themselves from becoming a victim of coronavirus - including the craziest methods found in the Internet.

Secondly, fear, rebellion and decreasing trust in the government, healthcare system and mainstream media can make us an easy target of disinformation. People react on the development of pandemic by looking for alternative news, which seemingly come from the uncensored and reliable sources or whistleblowers. All of them were simple lies.

Thirdly, time of crises such as Covid-19 are perfect opportunities for different "anti-system" movement - like opponents of 5G network or anti- vaccination movements, which are influenced by the growing number of tailored fake stories and led to increasing radicalization. These groups more and more often demanded a resolute action. Incremental build-up the sense of fear, uncertainty about the public administration, mainstream media or a social organization is undermining basis of democratic rules.

Currently, society slowly starts to adapt to pandemic time and lose interest in Covid-19 theme. It seems that pandemic was "called off", what is also visible in mainstream media content. Their

broadcast about Covid-19 limits mainly to new daily cases and for both media and society pandemic is no longer the most important topic. Let us try to sum up the coronavirus situation and find the most popular theories, which the most significantly influenced Polish infosphere.

In general, disinformation narratives were constructed in four main topics. First one was based on the old KGB theory about the origin of the virus. Second was even more harmful and complicated – it was a mix of conspiracy theories about coronavirus, 5G, anti-vaccination movements and other elements of anti-system approach. Third narration was a variation of false proofs to demonstrate that pandemic does not exist. The last narratives were linked with health protection.

USA, China or Soros

The first group of narrations was focused on the virus origin and most commonly pointed out China or the United States as the author of lethal virus. These theories were based on the stories that virus was produced in the laboratory to realize one of the following aims: global doomsday, biological weapon production or it was just an incident in military laboratory.

These narrations tried to prove one of countries guilty and brought the attention of public opinion on the proofs confirming it. The reasons of such actions are quite easy to understand and these narrations were used for propaganda aims to initiate in society a resistance against hostile country activities. Who was this hostile country, which produced the virus? This “enemy” changed and depended on the needs – so it could be the United States of America, China, Zionists or Bill Gates and the other bogeyman like George Soros or the Rotschild family.

The narrations about the country’s virus origin must be perceived in wider context of trade and technological war between the United States and China. They were used to confirm thesis that virus was produced to annihilate enemy, prove the Chinese ambitions to dominate the world or in opposite to stop it.

In information operations of both China and the United States the vital role was played by different scientific authorities that presented arguments that COVID-19 is Chinese or American biological weapon, result of incident in one of the laboratories or the main test to depopulate Earth. Obviously, there is always a place for the debate with real experts about the important topic, which is an origin of the virus, but it could not be a self-proclaimed expert or these who do not exist.

Telecommunication masts will go down

The second groups of narrations blend two already controversial topics: 5G networks and vaccinations. In case of 5G, there is not only the political controversies but also concerns about the potential negative health consequences. Still, they have not been resolved and they are a core of most of anti-5G movements. There is no doubt that such movements have a strong impact on social media discussion.

During the last month, there were many narratives claiming that pandemic is just a smokescreen for “murderous technology” enactment all over the world. Anti-5G movements tried to illustrate that the COVID-19 time coincides with the time of 5G implementation and quarantine was introduced to hide the roll-out of latest telecommunication standards. The presence of anti 5G and anti-vaccination movements in Poland are very visible. The growing radicalization of these groups is dangerous itself but if we added to this boiling pot coronavirus conspiracy theories it could be a grave threat. Just after the pandemic outbreak, the theme of vaccination appeared and automatically was consumed by the disinformation narratives.

The disinformation around 5G changed over time. Initially, pandemic was a tool to hide the harmful

effects of 5G and later transformed into fake stories claiming that transmitters spread virus. In the final version of this false story, the pandemic was initially induced to vaccinate people with microchips controlled by 5G. In the social media, there were many ideas, how the government will force society to vaccinate and how many people will die. Participants of the discussion forget about one important detail, the coronavirus vaccination still does not exist. Last but not the least, narratives maintained that countries without 5G were also coronavirus free. However, time verified these theories.

Pandemic is fake news!

Theories, which proved that the pandemic is a fake were also popular. If the persons claim that they do not comply with the government restrictions, which in their opinion are used to thwart society, could it be dangerous? Here is a serious challenge how to persuade people who believe in global conspiracy that governmental restrictions are necessary

These narrations promoting stories that pandemic is fabricated were distributed by different movies and pictures, which showed the empty hospitals with misleading commentary that there is no sick people inside. Luckily, the fact checkers come up to the mark and immediately disarm fake, harmful stories.

There was also a bunch of fake news produced on the spur of the moment like changing the meaning of pictures made during the protest in the United States or altering data to prove that governments lie.

The attack of Quacksalver, the magical lemon will cure you from the coronavirus ?

Uncertainty, ignorance or just a fear were exploited by many actors, who produce fake health advice. Popular cure for everything in Poland water with lemon cannot hurt anybody but the getting information from dubious and untrusted sources can.

The popular topic was also a looking for a vaccine and finding proofs that it was hidden from the citizens. There were also many "self-acclaimed experts" who try to prove that the dog's vaccine for a coronavirus can be also used against COVID-19. The similar situation repeated with the use of masks in public space, which was heavily criticized. The debate between doctors and epidemiologists on wearing mask in public places were fascinating and necessary but the participation of false experts distorted the image of serious discussion. There were a lot of fake news, which was provided by "friend who has a friend in hospital", "well known expert" (but without a name), "verified source (but without the name of this source)" or "a neighbor who has a friend who works in the laboratory and ". Social media were abundant with fake news about the negative effects of wearing masks. Most of them had one common factor - absolute lack of basic medical knowledge.

The social media was also a repository of knowledge about the numerous ways of prevention and treatment of the virus. In Polish social media platform, particularly popular were vinegar, water with lemon, baking soda, hot water, sun, licorice and universal and loved garlic. Moreover, these methods were not supported by any medical knowledge.

Pandemic - fertile ground for fake news

How to produce good fake news about the coronavirus? You need a photo or part of video ,a few key words like "uncensored", "checked", "from a good source", or the support by well-known internet expert (who may not exist) and you have a fertile ground to collect "likes" and "shares" in social media.

It is important to stress that conspiracy theories and fake news appear always there, where is

uncertainty, fear or panic. The dynamic situation linked with the coronavirus, rapid increase of ill people all around the world, introduction of quarantine and mysterious virus created a good situation for preparing alternative news and theories. In infosphere there is so much information about the pathogen that selection was necessary and still is.

The pandemic was exploited not only by disinformation actors but also by criminals who use COVID-19 to prepare various frauds to steal money by selling fake vaccinations or medicines against virus.

How can we fight fake news? There is no "silver bullet" here. Disinformation and fake news will not disappear. People like reading news, which support their ideas and we need to remember that every picture, movie and information can be transformed into fake news, when it is necessary. We repeat many times on CyberDefence24.pl that education and critical thinking is crucial in fighting with fake news. It requires a lot of work and time but the effects could be really impressive