

INFODEMIC - spreading fake news is almost as dangerous as spreading the virus

Op-ed by Amer Kapetanovic, Head of Political Department (RCC)

I came across the fake news related to coronavirus at the very early stage of pandemic outbreak on European soil. The message via viber, in English, which allegedly came from then the European epicenter of the pandemic, Northern Italy, reached me through one of those viber groups of friends and relatives. That fake info was specifically tailored to instigate the fear and panic: „....*what you are seeing in media reports from Italy these days was made up to cover the real truth. And real truth is that coronavirus is not killing elders, but it is killing kids in the first place. I have seen young people literally dying on the floor of hospital corridors, in pain and agony. Therefore, do not trust anyone, do not go out no matter how old are you, and please send this message further...*“. Despite the official briefings of the World Health Organization (WHO), scientifically approved statistics, percentages, words of doctors and experts, this info seemed to have caught attention of many people I know, most of them even believed it, and consequently were frightened to death.

The pandemic of Covid-19 besides evident physical illness and death has also spread around enormous fear of an unknown and invisible killer, which consequently inhibits people to temper fear with reason, panic with patience and uncertainty with education. In such circumstances conspiracy theories are floating around, without basis in the profession, without relevant fact checks: ex. „*Chloroquine is a proven cure*“ or „*children are immune to COVID-19*“ or „*5G network caused the pandemic*.“ These messages may contain worthless, wrong or even harmful information and advice, which can obstruct the public health response and add to social disorder and polarization.

Our region has not been immune to this either. Narratives such as “the virus was maybe developed in a lab to target China and Iran”, and many others, were visible in traditional media and social media across the region. Myriad of false and ill-intended information contaminated public sphere to an extent that led the World Health Organization to declare it the first „infodemic“ in human history, warning that the spread of fake news is almost as dangerous as spreading the virus.

A false story reaches people six times faster than a true one. Especially in crises there is an increased tendency of part of the population to trust the rumors rather than the official information, which is a consequence of an emotional reaction to fear. Then this information is shared further and most of them do it without a bad intent but simply because they are not informed enough to recognize unverified information, which can cause serious problems to the whole society. When fake news and disinformation are repeated and intensified, the real danger is that the actual information, based on truth, will have a limited impact.

What can be done to ensure that truthful, helpful and potentially life-saving information gains wider prominence?

Following the Cambridge Analitica/Facebook scandal regarding findings of Brexit referendum, in March 2019 the EU adopted legislation to protect elections from data misuse. Perhaps you'll also remember the case from the last year, when during the campaign for EU elections 500 suspect Facebook pages and groups across the region were found to be sharing false narratives or using other manipulative tactics to promote either far-right or anti-EU groups. The European Parliament condemned Russia, China, Iran and North Korea for their disinformation campaigns in Europe.

Finland, for example, is leading the fight to tackle fake news by educating primary school students how to combat it and teaching them media literacy skills. This has been on the education agenda for Finland since 2014 when the country was being targeted by fake news stories from Russia. It is therefore no surprise that Finland sits 1st in the media literacy index at 78, compared to the UK, France and Italy at 60, 59 and 51, respectively.

Survey by Gallup¹ showcases that in some economies of the Western Balkans people predominantly believe the danger of corona virus is exaggerated, in some cases with a very high margin of over 70% respondents. As one could easily expect, the French, Dutch, Austrians, Italians, etc. share the opposite stance – with over 70%, a majority that does not find any exaggeration. Low level of media literacy, among other things, seems to be playing very decisive role here. We therefore need to step in and find proper regional mechanisms

¹ Gallup International - <https://www.gallup-international.bg/en/43073/the-coronavirus-a-vast-scared-majority-around-the-world-according-to-the-snap-poll-by-gallup-international-association/>

and develop sustainable tools to supporting the Western Balkans' media and general public in differentiating between what is proven information published by credible media and what is either false or misinformation on social networks. As already well proven in times of corona, educated and properly informed citizens, who keep social distance and behave responsibly, are a key factor in dealing with pandemics. Fighting infodemics requires the same vigilance and responsibility – if media and citizens are able to recognize and contain false info and let it die in recycle bin of their gadgets, they will definitely stop wide range illicit-narrative “contamination”.

I am particularly glad to see efforts already undertaken by network-platform of NGO in the Western Balkans² aimed at instigating fact-checking and uncovering fake news and narratives. This is undoubtedly good step in the right direction, however far from sufficient and all-inclusive, whole of government and whole of society approach in dealing with such detrimental phenomenon. We have to do a way more in all walks of life.

The COVID - 19 virus pandemic can teach us many new lessons before it ends - about science, interpersonal relationships, the need for collaboration, economics, how to share knowledge, safety, hygiene, empathy and much more - but one thing is obvious: Only through common, coordinated and responsible action, result will be visible. For this reason, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is fully available for further initiatives related to preventing and combating fake news and illicit narratives.

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² A regional network of fact-checking organizations from the Western Balkan has launched the "Covid-19 Provjereni" Viber community, which monitors, checks and detect misinformation on a daily basis in the public space of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia , with a special focus on misinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.