DISINFORMATION BULLETIN

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LOCKDOWN IS LIFTED BUT DISINFORMATION PERSISTS

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Italian Far-Right Accuses Government of Introducing a "health dictatorship"

Roberto Fiore, National Secretary of the Italian far-right Forza Nuova party, has criticised counter-disinformation efforts supported by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and economist and ex-Chief of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. Fiore condemned suggestions that Italians should only be exposed to official media sources, also condemning the alternative media who he claims have endorsed the idea (including Facebook, YouTube and Italian media tycoon Berlusconi). Emphasising Forza Nuova's support for Italians who do not agree to the alleged media restrictions, which he claims are the result of a "dittatura sanitaria" (a health dictatorship), Fiore asserts "The Italians who revolt will find us by their side"[1].

Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation Embraced by Anti-vaccination Campaigns

Four months after the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Wuhan, China, medical research shows ambitious steps towards developing an effective vaccine. Yet as the global race to find and develop a safe vaccine advances, so too does a familiar malicious counterforce.

[1] "Forza Nuova: "E' dittatura sanitaria, non ci stiamo"", LuccainDiretta, published online 26.03.2020(https://www.luccaindiretta.it/politica/2020/03/26/forza-nuova-e-dittatura-sanitaria-non-ci-stiamo/172019/,accessed 02.05.2020).

Support for inoculation has never been uncontroversial, with religious, political, and health-related opposition accompanying each step of its development. Yet so dangerous is the "vaccine hesitancy"[2] resulting from this opposition, that the World Health Organization now considers it among the top ten threats to global health.

Public trust in, and support for, inoculation is paramount to its efficacy. In order to protect a population from a disease, a large proportion of the population must be vaccinated (for highly contagious diseases, such as measles, this is 90-95%)[3].

This means that an extremely significant majority of a given population must trust (and have access to) the vaccine. Misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories currently surrounding COVID-19 vaccines are a powerful force in shaking this trust. Furthermore, actors that weaponise these tools threaten to undermine the remarkable advances that medical researchers are making and risk jeopardising the effectiveness of a vaccine.

[2] *The term used by the World Health Organization's to describe the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate.* https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019

[3] *The BBC reports that an estimated 60-70% of the population would need to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in order for it to be effective (to reach heard immunity), however they emphasise that it is difficult to know at this stage.* https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51665497

As in many dis- and misinformation cases, it is unclear whether it is spread with the intention to deceive and confuse, to humour, or to divert attention from reliable sources. Similarly, we cannot always know whether we are confronted with an asymmetric threat to public health posed by individuals or small-scale organisations, or a symmetric threat deployed as part of a foreign or domestic political agenda – distinctions which can, in turn, influence the type of counter-measures employed. Most likely, all these motivations and actors have contributed to the smog of unreliable information surrounding COVID-19 vaccinations. In any case, all these forms of mis- and disinformation pose a serious threat to a global recovery from the virus and the challenges that accompany it.

Mis- and disinformation surrounding alternative causes, remedies, and protection against the virus have been embraced by anti-vaccination campaigns. Popular narratives include claims that the virus is only harmful to certain members of society (such as the elderly or immunosuppressed), that reported COVID-19 deaths are in fact caused by 5G transmissions (leading to the damaging of several 5G phone masts in the UK, Ireland, Belgium, and Cyprus), or that alternative remedies can be found in garlic, vitamin C, bleach, or as U.S. President Trump briefly suggested may work, disinfectant. All of these alternative means have been debunked by sources such as WHO, factcheck.org, and national public health institutions.

Media and health organisations have mobilised response mechanisms specifically targeting disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy surrounding COVID-19 health "myths". These offer both "mythbusting" and debunking, as well as clear and reliable medical advice.

See, for example:

- WHO Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public
- European Commission web page on EU response action to COVID-19
- Full Fact
- WHO COVID-19 Myth Busters

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has bought the pressing conversation surrounding the topic health and disinformation forward. It has highlighted the need not only to strengthen fact-checking responses, but also to supplement these with clear, reliable, and well-communicated information. As vaccinations offer an almost touchable chance to restore life as we knew it before the epidemic, mobilising these responses becomes more pertinent than ever.

In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, we must "flood the Internet with facts and science" to overcome misinformation on COVID-19, which he describes as "a poison that is putting even more lives at risk"[4].

Given the current health crisis, the world cannot afford to risk this poison.

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[4] UN News, (WWW) (https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061682; 14.04.2020)

Counter-disinformation measures: a cure worse than the disease?

Disinformation in times of crises is a powerful malevolent force. We have seen the effects of disinformation and fake news during the 2015 "migrant crisis", following terror attacks, and in the aftermath of natural disasters, where it has led to panic, confusion, and threats to public safety. It is therefore unsurprising (and appropriate) that states step up their counter-disinformation efforts in response to these.

Long before we knew the international scale at which COVID-19 would spread, increased fact-checking activities and large-scale information campaigns were well underway at national, EU, and international level. However, in some parts of the world, as the crisis worsened, these measures gave rise to repressive, disproportionate, and unnecessary state action.

Aggressive censorship, extortionate fines, and unjust imprisonment have proliferated the globe, often repressing content and authors considered unfavourable to the ruling government and their agenda. Some states have made the sharing of disinformation a punishable offence, others have gone further to ban the use of certain words altogether. These measures have often been applied blanketly to suspect information, irrespective of whether or not it has proven to be objectively harmful. The freedom of expression, of speech, and, through those, of the press, all written into the foundations of our democracies and protected by national, regional, and international legislation alike, have been put under serious threat. Here are just a handful of the many examples of the injustices that have been guised as "counter-disinformation measures" around the globe:

- Turkmenistan, ranked penultimately[1] on the RSF (Reporters Without Borders) World Press Freedom Index, is reported to have made discussing Corona virus in public a punishable offence (according to the RSF[5]). This comes in addition to removing the term from any publicly distributed health information brochures.

- In Cambodia, by the 24 March 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW)[6] had documented 17 arrests for sharing information on coronavirus. HRW reports that four members or supporters of the dissolved opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) were among the arrested.

- 30 March 2020, Hungary's parliament passed an emergency bill granting President Orban indefinite powers. to rule by decree. Among the provisions of the law, those publicising false information may face a prison sentence of up to five years.

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[5] Above only North Korea.
[6] Reporters Without Borders "Coronavirus off limits in Turkmenistan", published online 31.03.2020, updated 10.04.2020 (https://rsf.org/en/news/coronavirus-limits-turkmenistan).
[7]https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/24/cambodia-covid-19-clampdown-free-speech?utm_source=dailybrief&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=DailyBrief2020Mar24&utm_term=DailyNewsBrief

Such violations of the freedom of speech and of expression are, at best, an ineffective means of countering disinformation and, at worst, an inexcusable attack on democracy that denies citizens critical health advice at a time of crisis.

The international community has been quick to point the finger at countries in which the pandemic has revealed fractures in healthcare systems, humanitarian provisions, or social security. Why then should we turn a blind eye to where the pandemic has revealed similar fractures in democracy?

EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Concerned over Extremist Responses to Pandemic

An increasing number of experts from the international academic community, as well as from relevant governmental departments, have raised concerns about the potential for extremist activity to thrive alongside the pandemic, fuelled by new "hate stimulus" and a better environment for recruitment.

Often equally as bound by the physical lockdown regulations, in many parts of the world extremist groups are focussing on infiltrating the cyberspace, flourishing in far-right, far-left, and religious extremist circles (among others). Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, expresses just concern about heightened exposure to extremist content during quarantine: "People are confined and are a lot more online. It's an ideal opportunity to reach those who spend all day on their computers"[8].

[8] "*Militants, fringe groups exploiting COVID-19, warns EU anti terrorism chief*", *Swiss info, published online 30.04.2020 (https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/militants--fringe-groups-exploiting-covid-19--warns-eu-anti-terrorism-chief/45728648, accessed 1.05.2020).*
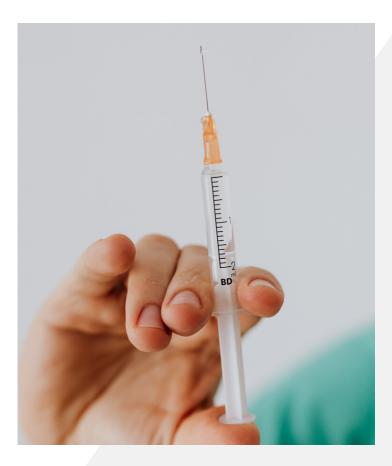
Similarly, Weimann and Masri[9] note in their recent publication "The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace", how the pandemic offers the prime environment for extremist groups to spread "hate, fear, panic, and chaos". Disinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 have been instrumental to these extremist groups, who have, for example, used anti-Semitic and xenophobic conspiracy to find scapegoats for the virus and its consequences (see Katz 2020[10]).

De Kerchove emphasises, however, that disinformation and conspiracy are also being used by far-left radicals who claim COVID-19 is spread through 5G technology or who are using the virus as stimulus for anti-capitalist or anti-globalisation agendas online, as well as by Islamic terrorist groups who gain support as fragile and corrupt governments, who already struggle to gain trust among their people, fail to respond the pandemic and oil price crises.

[9] *Weimann, G. and N. Masri* (2020) *The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace, International institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), https://www.ict.org.il/images/Dark%20Hate.pdf; 30.04.2020.*

[10] *Katz, R.* (2020) *The Far-right's Online Discourse on COVID-19 Pandemic, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/inSITE-Reports/the-far-right-s-online-discourse-on-covid-19-pandemic-forthcoming.html; accessed 01.05.2020.*

Urging states not to "lose sight of the security risks" as they focus their attention and resources on the health crisis, de Kerchove told Reuters[11] that he will soon outline his concerns specifically in a paper circulated to Member States.

The concerns of the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator or those of the WHO, General Secretary Guterres, Conte, or Fiore suggest an ever-widening nexus of issues that have been aggravated by COVID-19. They also show that besides all revolving around the virus, they all relate to, or are significantly exacerbated by, a lack of clear, reliable, and objective information. Therefore, to find an effective counterforce to mis- and disinformation, there is an evident need for Europe and the international community to adopt a cross-sector response and to do so with increasing urgency.

[11] *Reported in "Militants, fringe groups exploiting COVID-19, warns EU anti terrorism chief", Swiss info, published online 30.04.2020 (https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/militants--fringe-groups-exploiting-covid-19--warns-eu-anti-terrorism-chief/45728648, accessed 1.05.2020).*

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