The Psychological Dimension of COVID-19 Disinformation

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The COVID-19 pandemic presents one of the largest and most multi-faceted societal crises the world has seen. Medically, it threatens the health of millions and stretches already-strained hospitals and medical services. Economically, it threatens to plunge us into a fiscal trough not seen in this century. It also presents a social threat, exacerbating entrenched societal issues like inequality and division. In this area, the pandemic has propelled societies towards a precipice of potential conflict and destabilization that otherwise may have taken far longer to reach culmination. A growing concern is the role that information spaces play in this destabilization threat. Over recent years, an increasing number of malign actors have sought to infiltrate information ecosystems and intentionally spread false or misleading information, often termed as 'disinformation'. In doing so, adversaries are able to directly and freely influence the civilian domain and precipitate discord in societies through the erosion of trust, certainty or feelings of safety in citizens and the disruption of democratic processes.

Recent reports have suggested that the current pandemic is being exploited for such disinformation purposes. They purport that hostile actors are capitalizing on the high levels of uncertainty and anxiety that populations have been exposed to, to spread false or misleading information about the crisis. This is done with the end-goal of hampering feelings of trust in authorities and skewing perceptions of the competency displayed by state-level or international responses. Disinformation is inherently psychological. Its mechanism and consequences rest entirely on the accessing and influencing of civilian cognitions: their emotions and perceptions of the reality that they face. However, this pertinent psychological aspect of disinformation is currently critically neglected. While there are large bodies of research in social psychology that investigate relevant phenomena, such as trust, uncertainty or the perception of threats, insights from this research have yet to be thoroughly integrated into how we approach disinformation and building resilience towards it.

With this in mind, I turned to the EUvsDisinfo database – part of a project by the European External Action Service that logs instances of disinformation that push pro-Kremlin narratives. Through analyzing the logs that concerned COVID-19, starting from the beginning of the crisis, I was able to broadly delineate the prominent psychological factors being targeted in the logged disinformation reports, and the most prominent narratives being used to do so. Some of the most illuminating insights into this psychological dimension, however, can be gleaned by observing the temporal shifts in the logged disinformation as the crisis progressed. With the virus spreading exponentially, fanning out across the globe from its epicenter in Wuhan, it evolved from a limited, localized issue to one that was significant for the majority of the world's population. With these analyses, we can track how this evolution is paralleled in the composition of the accompanying disinformation. More specifically, we can look at the shifts in the psychological dimension of the disinformation as the snowballing crisis led to fluctuations in narrative focus.

An immediately striking observation is the early positioning of this emerging virus as the handiwork of an 'enemy'. This can be seen in the left-hand plot above. Through late January to early February, the crisis was just beginning, with cases seemingly limited to China and a handful dotted across Asia. Initially, with comparatively little attention or knowledge about this mysterious virus, the majority of logged disinformation reports sought to absorb it into an

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enduring anti-US rhetoric. Stories immediately ascribed the virus to a provocation by the United States – either directly, by presenting it as an act of conflict, or indirectly, by attributing it as a biological weapon that had been designed in American laboratories. For those receiving these disinformation reports, there would have been a bolstering of this ongoing 'perceived enemy' sentiment, with malicious intent instantly attached to the virus' emergence.

In these early days, it seemed that the development of this virus would simply be slotted into the ongoing 'United States is the enemy' discourse; it is the narrative and psychological factor that, as we can see in the plots above, received proportionally most of the focus in the beginning of the crisis. Indeed, this narrative and accompanying psychological factor grew steadily as the crisis progressed. A turning point, however, appeared in mid-March. At this time, the virus was becoming an imminent reality for vast swathes of the world's population. This proliferation appears to have been mirrored in the accompanying disinformation, with the analyses indicating a rapid diversification in the array of psychological factors targeted and narratives propagated. A first observation is the sharp rise in reports seeking to hamper feelings of certainty in information concerning the virus. This disinformation sought to distort the reality of the medical threat the virus presented: its origin, infection rate and who was most susceptible to contracting it. Reports ranged from disseminating unconfirmed medical information to the propagating of myths that specific ethnicities were more likely to contract or succumb to the virus.

A second prominent theme emerging around mid-March is the rise in disinformation reports that sought to hamper perceptions of the EU, NATO and other, typically Western, institutions. Here, reports sought to frame these institutions as incompetent and untrustworthy, often highlighting a supposed lack of aid and questioning their motives. The majority of these reports centered on the European Union, with many reports painting it as a failing institution whose cracks and lack of unity were being exposed through its 'disastrous' handling of the crisis. Many of these reports further predicted a possible disintegration of the union in the wake of the Coronavirus. Interestingly, outside of Russia, Italy was the audience that received the most of the disinformation that amplified this lack of trust in institutions.

We can see from the above plots that this anti-EU narrative quickly became the most common in the logged COVID-19 disinformation. It is also the narrative that seems to have contributed most to the undermining of citizen's trust in institutions. Its emergence, however, came comparatively later than that of the anti-US narrative. It coincided with the spate of lockdowns across Europe that were announced between the 11th and 20th of March, and as the crisis hit its peak in Italy. This was a moment of rapid change and fear on the European continent, as many countries adopted more extreme methods as they raced to limit the virus spread. In this, we can see how the psychological consequences of developing situations were harnessed and reinforced by these disinformation reports.

Italy itself became a central character in many of the logged disinformation reports, where it was often portrayed as an abandoned state that had been left to fight the virus with minimal resources or help from neighboring countries. Almost immediately, it became a canvas for malign actors to paint the European Union's failings and imminent demise. In doing so, this disinformation targeted perceptions of competency in the international response, and stimulated feelings of disappointment and distress in those looking on at Italy as a prediction of the situation that lay in their near future.

This depiction of Italy as an abandoned state also became a vehicle through which pro-Russian sentiments could be disseminated. Numerous reports portrayed Russia as Italy's 'savior', valiantly coming to Italy's aid as the rest of the world turned a blind eye. Indeed, many reports recounted how Russian aid rescued Italian medical services, or how Italians were replacing European Union flags with that of Russia. This psychological factor was the least common, however, limited to mainly Russia-adjacent audiences, or audiences in the Middle East.

Throughout the crisis, amidst swirling rhetoric of acts of war or disintegrating institutions, a consistent yet distinct effort was made to connect the virus to more abstract conspiracy theories. This included shadowy supra-governments that had co-opted the virus in an effort to mitigate rising populations or their supposed loss of control, to the virus having tell-tale markers of a laboratory origin. Famous and wealthy figures such as George Soros or Bill Gates were also frequently incriminated in these reports, such as in the recurring narrative that Bill Gates was using

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the virus as a means to microchip the world's population.

Such reports arose, similarly to those disparaging the European Union or spreading medical disinformation, in mid-March as the virus spread from a localized crisis to a global issue. Again, we see this reoccurring idea of capitalization: the appearance of a narrative that exploited the mounting feelings of fear and confusion in a civilian domain becoming increasingly aware of an imminent threat.

Perhaps the most interesting observation drawn from these analyses, however, is a more general one. There is a clear illustration of the dynamic nature of this disinformation. As the crisis evolved, so did its potential as a vector for different strands of disinformation. In this, we can see how the virus' initial designation as another case of US aggression shifted to it becoming the *prima facie* evidence of the European Union's lack of unity and imminent collapse. We can also observe then how the virus underwent a psychological shift: from a means to continue pushing an 'us vs. them' divide, to a vehicle to capitalize on and exacerbate the mounting fear and frustration in European citizens.

This adaptation exemplifies what we know about the hostile, 'hybrid' adversaries that implement these disinformation tactics. That is: how malign actors constantly monitor societal vulnerabilities, and in opportune moments, exploit the conditions and psychological environment in order to stimulate discord in their target most effectively. This connects more broadly to the conceptualization of hybrid threats, a term which describes the current blurred reality of modern-day warfare in which adversaries use below-threshold and irregular tactics, such as disinformation, to challenge different countries and institutions. These analyses reinforce how attuned such hybrid actors are to this psychological dimension of civilian domains, and consequently, how vital the dimension is to the discourse surrounding hybrid threats.

These analyses also point to the practical value of the psychological dimension for those seeking to increase resilience towards such hybrid tactics. A deeper insight into the psychological dimension of such disinformation can offer suggestions for those seeking to mitigate any hostile influences, such as on what aspects of the civilian domain strategic communication and other counter-efforts should focus. For the Coronavirus crisis, for example, knowledge that disinformation targeting Italian audiences focused on eroding trust in the European Union might point to reinforcing this psychological factor as a useful endeavor in enhancing resilience efforts. This is valuable knowledge for authorities seeking to coordinate a response to the virus that will rely heavily on cooperation from the civilian domain.

This is merely a beginning step in exploring the psychological dimension of disinformation related to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, it serves as an example of how one may start demarcating the psychological dimension of disinformation. It might act as an impetus for more research seeking to understand the possibilities this psychological dimension holds for resilience efforts. Future research will require a more granular analysis of what could be a fruitful area for those seeking to counter disinformation tactics.

Interactive displays of the above analyses and more can be found in an accompanying web application.

About the author:

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