How disinformation kills: philosophical challenges in the post-Covid society

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Abstract The paper argues that the large extent of disinformation has increased the number of deaths from coronavirus due to the proliferation of hoaxes spread via digital tools and media. It is noted that this problem could worsen in the post-COVID society and as such should be understood as having significant political import. Moreover, the phenomenon of disinformation has raised ethical questions around how to actively prevent deaths indirectly caused by hoaxes, as well as epistemological questions around maintaining criteria of truthfulness.

Keywords COVID-19 · Disinformation · Hoaxes

1 Disinformation in digital society

Disinformation has facilitated the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and, as a result, increased the number of deaths in many countries, especially those in which the government's narrative has trivialized the severity of COVID-19. The proliferation of hoaxes downplaying the incidence of COVID-19 and its effects on society has had a direct impact on society and its socio-economic relationships: it has helped to change governments, modify ideologies, and manipulate facts thanks to groups of key agents that have used digital tools to transmit all manner of disinformation.

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The phenomenon of disinformation in itself is nothing new (Fallis, 2015). We can see past examples of disinformation such as the narrative of AIDS being a disease that only affects homosexuals. Similarly, in the 2020 pandemic, information was circulated suggesting that COVID-19 is a Black or Latino disease. Yet, the crucial difference between the two cases is the sheer speed with which disinformation has spread and shaped public and political discourse today (Ruiz Martínez, 2018). This has been achieved through the dissemination of a series of informative elements via social networks and other digital tools on the internet. Such informative elements seek to change the recipients' ideological position. By "informative elements" we mean any item created with the aim of transmitting information. Examples of informative elements are news, images (with or without text), memes, multimedia videos, hyperlinks, and others with a similar character. According to Luciano Floridi's works on the philosophy of information, a General Definition of Information (GDI) should be understood in terms of data plus meaning (Floridi, 2011: 83–84). In this sense, in many of these informative elements, the information is not always to be found in words, but is sometimes conveyed solely through images that are visually meaningful to the recipients (following GDI.3 of Floridi's tripartite definition of information).¹ The agents who produce these informative elements include political parties, foundations, bots, governments, *trolls* or virtual communities, among others (Westerlund, 2019), who usually seek to arouse feelings, emotions, and visceral reactions that encourage immediate action. In the context of the pandemic, these agents have worsened the incidence of COVID-19 in society and exacerbated the number of deaths through the spread of disinformation.

In this short paper,² I want to tackle the problem of how the phenomenon of disinformation has increased the number of deaths during the coronavirus pandemic, how we can identify such a connection through the proliferation of hoaxes, and how we might address the following philosophical challenges: first, the epistemological confusion caused by disinformation, i.e., how to maintain the criteria of truthfulness; and second, the ethical question of how societies should shape their future to prevent the dissemination of hoaxes via social networks and other digital media.

2 Hoaxes and political aims

Disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged people to refrain from taking sanitary measures that could prevent or at least minimize the number of infections and deaths in the population. Such disinformation could persist in the post-COVID society.³ The connection between hoaxes and the increase in the

¹ Even though mass media commonly refers to "fake news" or "false information", following Floridi's definition, information is always valid. In this sense, there is no such thing as *false* information; instead we should refer to disinformation or misinformation, and disinformative or misinformative elements.

² In order to make explicit possible limitations of this study, it should be clarified that the author comes from a White-Hispanic background.

³ By "post-COVID society", I refer to society after the appearance of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus: a society that has been subject to a level of public health and economic disruption unprecedented in this generation and that calls for new tools and concepts in order to be adequately comprehended.

number of deaths lies in the dissemination of informative elements. While not necessarily evident to their recipients, informative elements transmit a series of ideological thoughts or views that seek to change the subject's political and social perspectives.⁴ This goal is often pursued with information that has a supposedly comic slant (as is the case with most memes, for example). The majority of hoaxes that are spread via social networks are informative elements of this type, insofar as they do not seem to be generated spontaneously by the social mass, but rather by agents seeking to embed specific, false ideas in subjects' minds in an exercise similar to "astroturfing." Evidence of this process of inculcation can be found in the context of the appearance of COVID-19, when most hoaxes have focused on promoting the non-use of sanitary measures or attacking these measures in order to encourage an emotional and violent reaction from members of the public.

Providing a comprehensive and trusted public health service is a complex and fraught task. This fact is borne out by historical examples of hoaxes that produced negative impacts on public health, such as the false claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism. An earlier example can be found in the emergence of an antivaccination movement in 1921 in New York when health workers were in the process of vaccinating thousands of children every day in order to prevent diphtheria. Eventually public health officials created a campaign to build a sense of safety around vaccination (Hammonds, 1999). In today's context, the situation is made worse by campaigns of disinformation and propaganda being used to the detriment of public health, which has led to the emergence of a new antivaccination movement.

The technological context of our digital society, together with the current state of social uncertainty about COVID-19, have facilitated the rapid spread of these hoaxes and disinformation that could lead to severe public health problems. Among other things, these hoaxes suggest there is a connection between coronavirus and 5G technology, the latter providing governments with the opportunity to manipulate people. We also see claims that "The virus is a secret attempt by the global elite to reduce overpopulation" or "Drinking bleach, chlorine dioxide, colloidal silver or one's own urine can help kill the virus" (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020).

While the coronavirus pandemic was primarily a health problem, the spread and impact of the virus have been worsened by disinformation and hoaxes, which have potentially increased the number of COVID-19-related deaths. Taking into account these findings, we have the opportunity to consider our capacity to respond to health crises and to prepare for future events of a similar nature.

3 Philosophical challenges for a post-COVID society

The context and technological conditions in which COVID-19 has spread have brought about an epistemological confusion in large groups of subjects who receive informational elements through digital media.⁵ This confusion occurs when

⁴ This is then (hoped to be) eventually translated into votes in democratic processes.

⁵ I.e., users of digital tools such as social networks.

individuals are incapable of maintaining high-quality criteria of truthfulness once they have received informative elements of an ideological nature. Epistemological confusion is manifested by people granting truthfulness mainly to what they *want* to be true, although the traditional criteria for evaluating information as truthful (e.g., checking information against high-quality journalism or highly esteemed and peer-reviewed scientific work) indicate its falsity. There are two clear results of this process. Both disinformation and the proliferation of hoaxes (1) indirectly cause more deaths through epistemological confusion; and (2) increase social uncertainty insofar as social and political movements can be rapidly influenced due to the dissemination of informative elements and based on recipients' epistemological confusion. Moreover, the onset of COVID-19 has demonstrated that these changes, for the first time in history, are occurring simultaneously throughout the world on account of digital globalization (Brennen et al., 2020), which allows informative elements to reach potentially millions of individuals in the milliseconds it takes for an electronic device to be unlocked by facial recognition or fingerprint.

It is an ethical challenge to elucidate how societies should shape their future in a post-COVID society. Due to the issues discussed above, the forms of apprehension of reality nowadays depend not only on our understanding of it, but on how it is shaped by the ideological burden of the disinformation phenomenon based as it is on political interests, something that Echeverría and Almendros (2020) have called the "domination of minds."

The advent of widespread and rapid disinformation increases the number of deaths through the proliferation of hoaxes and epistemological confusion. This dire situation should be understood as a political signal of what a post-COVID society could look like. To that end, we should ask ourselves: how can we reduce the incidence of pandemics when facing global health threats, now and in the future? How can we ensure that the phenomenon of disinformation does not cause an increase in the number of deaths through the dissemination of (dis)informative elements on the internet? Can disinformation and the dissemination of hoaxes be controlled in order to improve public health? How would this kind of information be controlled? How do we deal with the problem of epistemological confusion? Would the enhancement of critical thinking through training and education help society to avoid being deceived by informative elements with political purposes? If so, would this mean that critical thinking can increase our chances of overcoming future health threats, and improve our understanding of life and death as social and political processes?

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