

Rethinking the Infodemic: Global Health Security and Information Disorder

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on the *infodemic* constructs the combination of the pandemic and disinformation as a new source of insecurity on a global scale. How can we make sense – analytically and politically – of this newly politicized nexus of public health, information management, and global security? This article proposes approaching the phenomenon of the *infodemic* as an intersecting securitization of information disorder and health governance. Specifically, it argues that there are two distinct frames of security mobilized in the context of infodemic governance: *information as a disease and information as a weapon*. Drawing on literatures on global health and the emerging research on disinformation, the paper situates the two framings of the infodemic in broader discourses on the medicalization of security, and securitization of information disorder, respectively. The article critically reflects on each framing and offers some preliminary thoughts on how to approach the entanglements of health, security, and information disorder in contemporary global politics.

KEYWORDS

infodemic, disinformation, vaccine diplomacy, global health, security, COVID-19

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Already at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, on 15th February 2020, the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned that “*we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous*” (WHO 2020A). In a similar spirit, the US President Joe Biden asserted that misinformation about the pandemic and the COVID-19 vaccines is “*killing people*” (BBC 2021). Albeit published in different contexts and at different stages of the pandemic, these statements share a common message: by denying the existence or seriousness of the virus, or promoting distrust in vaccines and other medical measures, misleading information makes the outbreak of the pandemic worse. This phenomenon has been described by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an *infodemic*, understood as an “*overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that occurs during an epidemic. It can lead to confusion and ultimately mistrust in governments and public health response*” (WHO 2020b). The WHO and other experts warn that the harmful impact of the infodemic is amplified by digital technologies and thus it poses a more serious problem than similar phenomena in the past.

The discourse on the infodemic constructs the combination of the pandemic and disinformation as a new source of insecurity on a global scale. How can we make sense – politically and analytically – of this newly politicized nexus of public health, information management, and global security? In this article, I argue that the phenomenon of the infodemic can be understood as an intersecting securitization of health and information disorder. I highlight some recent theoretical developments in global health, a field of International Relations studying the entanglements of global politics and public health, and outline how research on global health might approach the theme of disinformation. I draw on literature on global health security (ELBE 2010; HARMAN 2012; KICKBUSCH 2005; MCINNES – LEE 2012) and link it with the emerging research on political, social, and military dimensions of disinformation (DANIEL – EBERLE 2018, 2021; FRIDMAN 2018; GALEOTTI 2019; LANOSZKA 2016; MONSEES 2021). Specifically, I use the concept of *information disorder*, as introduced by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017). The concept of information disorder goes beyond the notions of ‘fake news’ or disinformation, which have been appropriated by political elites around the world and which provide only a narrow perspective on an otherwise rather complex phenomenon (WARDLE – DERAKHSHAN 2017: 5). The concept of information disorder

highlights the roles of different actors involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of messages and distinguishes several types of messages (mis-, dis-, and malinformation).¹ As such, the term acknowledges the multiplicity of intentions, harm, and dynamics of information circulation.

This paper shows that the discourse on the infodemic mobilizes two distinct – yet not mutually exclusive – security narratives constructing the link between health and information disorder. In the first narrative, information is framed as a disease, and its governance is informed by the logic of medicalization of security. In the second narrative, information is framed as a weapon, used strategically in international politics as a part of (geo)political rivalry, and approached via the lenses of militarization. I briefly describe the key tenets of each framing of the information disorder and critically reflect on them. By doing so, the article seeks to provide some preliminary reflections on how to think about the intersecting securitization of health and information governance, and outline how to understand the increasing interconnectedness of health, disinformation, and global security through broader literatures.

POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE VIRUS: TWO TALES OF (IN)SECURITY

As we have been reminded via numerous examples, from negotiating the regimes for covid-safe international travel (E.G. CRESSWELL 2021; SEYFI – HALL – SHABANI 2020) to vaccine production and distribution (DAVIES – WENHAM 2020; E.G. FIDLER 2020; KOBIERECKA – KOBIERECKI 2021), the pandemic is a social phenomenon shaping and shaped by multiple political factors. The efforts to contain the virus have intersected with numerous global political and security issues, from the functioning of global health institutions to intellectual property rights, international mobility, border control, data protection, or human rights. However, the conceptual vocabulary for exploring the links between health, global security, and newly also disinformation is still rather limited.

The meaning-making of the COVID-19 pandemic is still an open-ended process, but what resonates strongly in many discussions on the pandemic is the role of information governance as affecting the governance of the disease. To tackle the pandemic, individual citizens are asked to do their part of the job and follow specific hygiene and medical practices – wear

masks, socially distance, wash their hands, and get vaccinated. This approach, however, exposes some vulnerability of the liberal democratic politics: on the one hand, citizens are entitled to make informed choices about their health individually (such as whether to get vaccinated against covid), but on the other hand, to fully protect the population and stop the virus from further mutating, these rules and practices would ideally be followed by everyone. To persuade the citizens to follow these rules, their trust in the public authorities issuing these rules is needed (CF. E.G. HELSINGEN ET AL. 2020; SIEGRIST ET AL. 2021). Instead of focusing on building trust, however, much of the public as well as expert debate about compliance and non-compliance with the individual measures is focused on the issue of news consumption and the “quality” of information about the pandemic that citizens receive.

When we look at the discourse on the infodemic, we can find two main framings of the health-information nexus, or the infodemic: on the one hand, *information as a disease*, and on the other hand, *information as a weapon*. While the first framing focuses on consequences of information disorder and how to deal with it, the second one highlights the role of agents (allegedly) creating and controlling the information disorder and links it with the struggle for power in the international arena. This section looks at these narratives to reflect on the logic and strategies that they promote.

INFORMATION AS A DISEASE

According to the WHO, “[a]n infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response” (WHO 2021). In effect, an infodemic can prolong an outbreak. The WHO further points out that an infodemic is interconnected with the rise of social media and the internet. As a remedy, it promotes *infodemic management based on “risk- and evidence-based analysis”* and providing *“credible health information, and building resilience to misinformation for people worldwide”* (WHO 2021).

It is in this context that scientists reinvigorate the research of infodemiology (E.G. CUAN-BALTAZAR ET AL. 2020), initially established to improve public health through measuring and tracking health information on the

internet and in the population ^(EYSENBACH 2009), and seek to measure the impact of misinformation on the dynamic of the pandemic, as exemplified, for instance, by the intent to get vaccinated ^(LOOMBA ET AL. 2021). The WHO directly supports infodemiology, suggesting that it shall aim to *“build and deliver sustainable tools that health authorities and communities can use to prevent and overcome the harmful impacts caused by infodemics”* ^(WHO 2021).

In its call for action to manage the infodemic, the WHO and many other experts call for “information hygiene” and seek to develop good practices for this type of personal behaviour: *“Although infodemics are not a new phenomenon, the volume and rapid scale-up of facts, but also misinformation and disinformation, surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak are unprecedented. Owing to the opportunities and challenges brought by new technologies and social media platforms, the infodemic that accompanies the first pandemic of the digital age is more visible and challenging than ever before. Practicing information hygiene, just as we are practicing hand and cough hygiene, is thus becoming vital to prevent the spread of the virus”* ^(WHO 2020C).

The problem of the infodemic is constructed as a technologically mediated problem directly affecting health practices of people during a health emergency. Therefore, individual resilience against “bad news” is supported – typically via the promotion of good practices on information hygiene – and seen as a way to build societal resilience against disinformation and consequently also the pandemic. This logic is promoted, for instance, by the European Union External Action Service, which writes about building “immunity” to covid disinformation: *“Just like vaccines can provide immunity to viruses, including COVID-19, we can build immunity to disinformation. And we can do it ourselves. Hygiene, such as frequent hand-washing, helps to protect us from COVID-19. In the same manner, information hygiene can slow down the spread of harmful misleading information, especially on the social media”* ^(EEAS 2021).

Among the initiatives to counter covid misinformation was, for instance, a global campaign launched by the UK Government in partnership with the WHO and the BBC called “Stop The Spread”, which aimed to raise the public’s awareness of covid misinformation and encouraged people to double-check the information that they hear – and intend to spread – about the pandemic from trusted sources. Similar initiatives typically focus on,

first, increasing trust in scientific evidence and sharing positive messages about vaccines, and, second, fact-checking and fighting myths about covid and vaccines. The latter becomes a particularly vibrant sphere with many actors getting involved in promoting good practices of information hygiene, media literacy, and fact-checking, including governments and state institutions (e.g. the “Stop The Spread” campaign, the online game called Go Viral!, which is supported by the UK government, the fact-checking website of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, etc.), civil society (such as the News Literacy Project), as well as international organizations (e.g. the EU-funded project EUvsDisinfo).

The politicization of the infodemic can be seen as a recognition of how social and political factors play a role in governing health. Scholars of global health have already pointed out how global health governance gets increasingly securitized, as certain health issues are framed as security threats and approached via exceptional, or otherwise non-traditional policy means (ELBE 2006; FIDLER 2003; HOWELL 2014; KELLE 2007; MCINNES – LEE 2012; SJOSTEDT 2008). At the same time, they observe another development at the boundary of security and health politics: the use of medical language and practices to address security issues. This *medicalization of insecurity*, as Elbe shows (ELBE 2010, 2012), leads to more and more pressure to develop medical interventions at the level of the individual as well as the society and ultimately contributes to reconceptualizing the logic of security (ELBE – VOELKNER 2014: 78–79). As such, the medicalization of insecurity relates to a changing understanding of security and insecurity in world politics and changing views on who is entitled to practice security and through what instruments (ELBE 2012).

The tale of information disorder as a disease is firmly based on the logic of medicalization of insecurity. By using medical metaphors to describe the nature of the problem and the solutions to it, it provides a seemingly depoliticized view on the interconnectedness of health, technology, and social behaviour. However, this view overlooks actors as well as systemic factors behind the production and circulation of conspiracy theories, misleading news, and mixed messages. Instead of searching for who is responsible for the information disorder, or focusing on the underlying social, political as well as technological conditions that make it possible and desirable, the tale of information as a disease focuses on prevention

and the cure. This framing of the infodemic provides a very narrow, techno-individualistic narrative which puts emphasis on media literacy and effectively responsabilizes the individual for developing resilience amid the infodemic rather than looking for social conditions that enable the covid-related information disorder.

INFORMATION AS A WEAPON

Apart from the medical framing of the infodemic, which presents the rise of information disorder as yet another virus complicating the containment of the pandemic, we can find another framing of the health-information nexus – a security framing constructing the information disorder as a tool of (geo)political rivalry. This framing focuses on disinformation and foreign influence operations and presents the COVID-19 information disorder as a part of the struggle for power and authority in the international arena. The covid-related information disorder is then seen as a product of influence campaigns and “weaponized” information. Some experts even suggest understanding this nexus as a cyber-biowarfare and argue that: “...*in light of the rise of state-sponsored online disinformation campaigns we are approaching a fifth phase of biowarfare with a ‘cyber-bio’ framing. [...] Biowarfare in the fifth era aims to undermine sociopolitical systems through social, political, and economic means by ‘weaponizing’ or ‘virtually escalating’ natural outbreaks, rather than directly inducing mortality and morbidity in populations through the deployment of harmful biological agents*” (BERNARD ET AL. 2021: 3).

Neither misinformation related to disease outbreaks nor information campaigns about biological weapons are new. For instance, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union accused the United States of creating HIV/AIDS (GRIMES 2017), and similarly China and North Korea argue that the United States engaged in germ warfare during the war in Korea (LEITENBERG 2016). What is new in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, is the popularity of these narratives and the fact that they have been openly shared by some political elites, experts, and mainstream media, and not only by fringe players of the information space.

Some of the narratives focus on accusing other states of mishandling the pandemic; others go as far as to argue that COVID-19 is a man-made biological weapon and the information disorder related to it is

a part of co-ordinated state-sponsored information campaigns, which are sometimes even referred to as a new type of biological war (DFRLAB 2021). Interestingly, this framing can be found not only in policy circles whose communication is typically aimed at a domestic audience, but in certain versions also among academics and think-tank experts (E.G. BERNARD ET AL. 2021; NIE 2020). The best-known example is the repeated labelling of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and the “Wuhan virus” by the US President Donald Trump (LINDAMAN – VIALA-GAUDEFROY 2020), which put the blame for the pandemic on China and went against the guidelines of the WHO for naming of diseases (WHO 2015). This further intensified when Trump pursued the lab leak theory, suggesting that SARS-CoV-2 was originally engineered as a bioweapon by researchers in the Wuhan laboratory (SINGH ET AL. 2020).

Both the United States and the European Union further accused Russia of aggravating the pandemic situation in the West by spreading disinformation (GLENZA 2020; RANKIN 2020). The Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division (StratCom) of the European External Action Service has been particularly active in monitoring the information disorder and repeatedly warned against “pro-Kremlin” COVID-19 disinformation (EEAS 2021). In a report on COVID-19 disinformation, it explains the relevance of these narratives: *“In the EU and elsewhere, coordinated disinformation messaging seeks to frame vulnerable minorities as the cause of the pandemic and to fuel distrust in the ability of democratic institutions to deliver effective responses. Some state and state-backed actors seek to exploit the public health crisis to advance geopolitical interests, often by directly challenging the credibility of the European Union and its partners”* (EEAS 2020).

What receives particular attention in this regard is theories that *“deny the actual epidemiological complexities of the pandemic while offering simple geopolitical imaginations of sinister powers who conspire against the world’s population”* (STURM ET AL. 2021: 7). These stories offer a simple explanation of global affairs, assuming the existence of international power structures that initiate conspiracies of a global scale. Such narratives can be understood as constructing alternative geopolitical imaginaries, or fantasies of geopolitics (CF. LAKETA 2019), and thus offering alternative visions of the socio-political order – which is exactly what makes them seem threatening.

This framing and this approach, however, are not new and need to be contextualized in the prior securitization of information disorder, which has been promoted by some actors for already a few years now as a part of the fight against “hybrid threats”. As argued elsewhere (MONSEES 2021; RYCHNOVSKÁ – KOHÚT 2018), in an attempt to explain the polarization of society and the rise of populism in Europe and the United States, information disorder has been securitized and framed in military terms, shifting the attention to state-sponsored propaganda and information operations and presenting them as a part of a new type of ‘hybrid warfare’ (DANIEL – EBERLE 2021; MÄLKSOO 2018). StratCom is a typical example of a platform where the practices of fighting disinformation have been institutionalized for several years now as a part of the EU’s response to hybrid threats.

There are multiple security narratives framing COVID-19 as a weapon, ranging from pure conspiracy theories interpreting COVID-19 as an intentionally released bioweapon, to those that focus on countries that want to use the pandemic for their own gain and use misinformation for that purpose. What unites them is the focus on state actors as the exclusive – or at least dominant – producers and disseminators of the COVID-19 disinformation, and the interpretation of these narratives as a part of foreign influence operations. I propose to look at these narratives as militaristic, since they provide a state-centric perspective on the problem of the infodemic, and they explicitly or implicitly treat (dis)information as a weapon in the hands of states. I sought to show that this framing is not new but is embedded in the existing securitization of information disorder (most visible in the EU), which has shaped the discourse and practices on the covid-related infodemic.

GLOBAL HEALTH SECURITY AND INFORMATION DISORDER

This paper identified two frames of security present in the discourse on the infodemic: information as a disease, and information as a weapon. The tale of information as a disease promotes fighting “bad information” with “good information”. Anchored in the logic of medicalization of insecurity, it downplays the issue of agency, yet also focuses only on a very limited scope of systemic factors that contribute to the infodemic – typically the technological context of social media and digital technologies, which enable the fast spread of news and its global outreach. The tale of

information as a weapon approaches information disorder as a tool and a result of political rivalry. It is situated in military logic and focuses only on a very selective agency informed by a traditional geopolitical view of international affairs as shaped by great powers. In effect, each framing empowers different kinds of actors and forms of expertise and legitimizes different policy solutions.

These two frames are not mutually exclusive, and there are certainly other narratives on COVID-19 (dis)information than the ones discussed here. What these two demonstrate well, however, is distinct modalities of securitizing the health-information nexus, or securitizing information disorder in the context of global health. To recognize the multiplicity of intentions, types of harm, and dynamics of information circulation is indeed a key step in unpacking the phenomenon of the infodemic and addressing it as a complex, multi-layered ‘wicked problem’ (CF. RITTEL – WEBBER 1973). This means to accept that the problem contains several dimensions which might need to be addressed separately “*with different types of urgency, expertise, and in a different mode of knowledge production*” (EVANS ET AL. 2021: 198).

The management of information disorder becomes a new space of global governance, and the pandemic only hastened these efforts.² Therefore, it is only advisable that scholars of global politics pay more attention to the intersection of global health and information governance, and the broader socio-political and technological developments that underpin this nexus. Among the key tasks for researchers is to explore what makes the conspiracy thinking on global health so popular and socially acceptable. Opening to literatures on disinformation, the politics of post-truth, and conspiracy theories from political science, geography, sociology, policy studies and other related disciplines could be a good step to enrich the conceptual vocabulary and theoretical frameworks through which we make sense of the intersection of global security, health, and information management.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Wardle and Derakshan suggest that “[m]is-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant. Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm. Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (2017: 5).

- 2 Prior attempts to govern information disorder include, for instance, programmes to fight online radicalization (Baker-Beall et al. 2014; Hoskins et al. 2011).

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