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Chapter 3—Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Internal and External Challenges for the EU

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The corona crisis is also a disinformation crisis for the global community in general, and for the European Union (EU) in particular. What is less clear is how adequate the EU's response to the 'infodemic' has been. This essay exposes the dangers of disinformation for the EU, which have intensified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and reviews relevant EU responses. It then zooms in on two challenges exacerbated by the corona crisis: one internal, revolving around the toxic effect of conspiracy theories, particularly the corona-5G hoax; and one external, relating to the public diplomacy campaigns of competing geopolitical actors, especially China. The essay argues that the future of European stability will rest not only on ensuring societal resilience to disinformation and conspiracy theories but also on designing ethically guided pre-emptive mechanisms and confronting external sources of disinformation which jeopardise European health provisions, economic recovery and geoeconomic strength.

Introduction

The corona crisis is also a disinformation crisis for the global community in general, and for the European Union (EU) in particular. As an expert from the European External Action Service (EEAS) StratCom Division pointed out, 'It has been very clear that the information and manipulation of information has become a security problem.'³⁶⁴ What is less clear is how adequate the EU's response to the coronavirus 'infodemic' has been. In addition, the blurring between public diplomacy and harmful disinformation highlighted by the corona crisis raises ethical questions for the future of EU strategic communication.

In this paper, we first expose the dangers of disinformation for the EU, which have intensified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and review relevant EU responses. We then discuss the prospects of EU strategic communication by concentrating on two challenges exacerbated by the corona crisis: one internal – the toxic effect of conspiracy theories on the EU public sphere, particularly the corona-5G hoax – and one external – public diplomacy campaigns of competing geopolitical actors, especially China. In conclusion, we argue that the future of European stability not only rests on ensuring societal resilience to disinformation and conspiracy theories, but also designing pre-emptive mechanisms and confronting external sources of disinformation which jeopardise European health provisions, economic recovery, and geo-economic strength.

³⁶⁴ Interview with staff from the EEAS StratCom Division, Brussels, July 2019.

Challenges of Disinformation for Multilateral Approaches

Building on the growing literature on this subject, we define disinformation as the intentional and systematic manipulation of information deceiving a target audience to cause public harm, generate profit, and/or advance political goals.³⁶⁵ While disinformation is not novel, the digitalisation of information and communication has transformed its conduct and impact. As aptly put by Joseph Nye: ‘What’s new is not the basic model; it’s the speed with which such disinformation can spread and the low cost of spreading it.’³⁶⁶ The recent upsurge in digital activities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened this phenomenon.

Both state and non-state actors are at the source of disinformation, which organisations, the media, and individuals including public figures may then relay. Digital channels are particularly effective means of spreading disinformation because of the amplification mechanisms they present (e.g. bots, trolls, algorithms, echo-chambers). Facebook is the platform of choice, primarily because of the massive audiences that it can reach relative to other networks. Disinformation materialises in different forms, commonly (a) unsourced or false claims, (b) non-credible claims with sources, (c) claims based on unsourced or non-credible claims, and (d) conspiracy theories.³⁶⁷ At the receiving end, disinformation mainly affects minority groups and thrives in socially unstable environments with vulnerable media ecosystems and contested institutions. The reception and relay of disinformation is thus closely linked to its environment, hence the role of online regulations.

While the literature on the impact of false news and propaganda has expanded in recent years, research is still limited and theoretical answers are more advanced than empirics, especially in Europe.³⁶⁸ Empirical studies are however crucial to measure and understand the effect of disinformation (e.g. on voting behaviour) and develop appropriate responses accordingly. Measuring the influence of such a volatile phenomenon is a difficult enterprise, which calls for mixed methods taking into account the quantity *and* quality of disinformation. Indeed, disinformation generates higher engagement than mainstream news, despite a smaller reach compared to established news brands.³⁶⁹

Among the nascent literature on the effects of disinformation, three trends emerge. First and foremost, disinformation is likely to *increase polarisation*, in particular along politically partisan lines, by spreading harmful conspiracy theories, radical and supremacist thoughts, Islamophobia, cynicism, racism, distrust, and misogyny.³⁷⁰ Second, disinformation contributes to *lowering trust in mainstream media and institutions*, although these two variables appear to

³⁶⁵ See Bennett and Livingston 2021, 124; Freelon and Wells 2020, 145; HLEG 2018, 3.

³⁶⁶ Nye 2018.

³⁶⁷ Bjola and Pamment 2016, 135.

³⁶⁸ Freelon and Wells 2020; Tucker et al. 2018, 15.

³⁶⁹ Fletcher et al. 2018, 4–5.

³⁷⁰ Faris et al. 2017; Jeangène Vilmer et al. 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017.

be mutually reinforcing.³⁷¹ Finally, disinformation poses a *threat to democratic political processes* by corrupting the integrity of electoral processes and undermining the democratic values which shape public policies, including in the health and science sectors.³⁷²

Disinformation has increasingly caught governmental actors' attention, yet they still struggle to respond to its evolving nature. Over the past five years, EU Member States have equipped the EEAS with three regional StratCom Task Forces. In 2018, the EU released a comprehensive *Action Plan against Disinformation*. Its measures focus on developing societal resilience through fact-checking and public diplomacy and rely on voluntary abidance to non-binding rules such as a Code of Practice for online platforms. The limitations of this approach have become evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Member States struggled to collectively communicate and confront the 'infodemic'. Experts called for more pre-emptive measures and proactive sensitization of users, most notably following the leak of a controversial EEAS report ringing the alarm bell with regard to disinformation campaigns led by China and Russia.³⁷³ Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg himself called for stricter European regulations of online platforms.³⁷⁴

On 10 June 2020, the EU released a Joint Communication on tackling COVID-19 disinformation. It warns of the 'severe consequences' of false news, conspiracy theories, hate speech, fraud, as well as foreign influence operations and disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19.³⁷⁵ With this in mind, it calls for yet another set of non-binding measures to facilitate coordinated action, increase digital platforms' responsibility, strengthen media freedom, and boost awareness, critical thinking, and media literacy. This development is a belated step in the right direction but remains dependent on voluntary action and lacks strong pre-emptive and accountability mechanisms. It reignites the discussion about the effectiveness of the EU's strategic communication and the urgent need to protect its information space. In the following sections, we review the prospects of EU strategic communication by analysing two challenges exacerbated by the COVID 'infodemic': the toxic effect of conspiracy theories on the EU public sphere, particularly the corona-5G hoax, and the influence campaigns promoted by competing geopolitical actors, especially China.

Digital Dissemination of COVID-19-Related Conspiracies

Conspiracy thinking prospers in times of crisis as the anxious public struggles to make sense of the unfolding situation and exert control over a hostile environment.³⁷⁶ Conspiracies open discursive spaces to obtain cognitive relief but may prove self-defeating. Research has found,

³⁷¹ Bennett and Livingston 2021, 126–127; Bjola and Papadakis 2020, 3; Faris et al. 2017.

³⁷² Bayer et al. 2019, 60–72; McKay and Tenove 2021.

³⁷³ Emmott 2020; European Parliament 2020.

³⁷⁴ Stolton 2020.

³⁷⁵ European Commission and HRVP 2020.

³⁷⁶ Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017.

The discursive community promoting the 5G coronavirus conspiracy (brown network) had matured by April to the point that it reached the same size as that supporting the quarantine measures, including EU action³⁸¹ (purple network). From a communication perspective, this had two important consequences. First, it meant that the health messages that authorities were trying to convey to the public became increasingly contested. Second, it made it difficult for public authorities to debunk and challenge the premises of the conspiracy without risking to further amplify their message. Conspiracies are embraced by the public not for their factual value, but for their ability to provide a (false) sense of reassurance in times of great uncertainty. Fact-based debunking thus risk elevating their visibility without necessarily undermining their appeal.

The 5G conspiracy case illustrates a more general dilemma that the EU faces in its strategic communication. One may argue that conspiracies are short lived, without necessarily having a long-lasting effect on the public sphere. Nevertheless, the digital medium has re-written the rules of mass communication and its vulnerability to toxic disinformation can no longer be ignored, especially on public health issues.³⁸² While the specific content of conspiracy theories may not persist, a more enduring effect relates to the systemic epistemic cynicism that they cultivate and encourage among the general public, which has a direct negative effect on the deliberative capacity of democratic systems to respond and adjust themselves in times of crises.³⁸³

The case of COVID-19-related conspiracies offers the EU some important lessons about how similar forms of digital disinformation could be prevented from corrupting its public sphere in the future. This requires close monitoring of the online space so that conspiracy narratives with the strongest disruptive potential can be promptly detected and debunked, especially the laminations that help expand their thematic content. It also requires special care for the EU not to compromise its fundamental values and normative power in combating online conspiracies, especially with respect to the truthfulness of the debunking message and the proportionality of the response. While for authoritarian governments, disinformation and public diplomacy are often intertwined, this is not an option for the EU.

While these measures can help contain the dissemination of conspiracy theories in the short term, more systematic efforts (e.g., media literacy, educational campaigns, support for high-quality journalism) ought to be pursued in the long term to foster societal resilience, which some EU Member States already have been advocating since 2015³⁸⁴. As EU High Representative Josep Borrell remarked: ‘Disinformation in times of the coronavirus can kill.’³⁸⁵ Digital propaganda could be seen as an outside ‘virus’ that invades the ‘informational body’ of

³⁸¹ European Union 2020.

³⁸² Broniatowski et al. 2018; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018.

³⁸³ McKay and Tenove 2021.

³⁸⁴ Lidegaard et al. 2015.

³⁸⁵ European Commission 2020.

the target country and then uses the ‘chemical machinery’ of the host to keep itself alive.³⁸⁶ Pro-active measures play the role of the antiviral drugs, which do not destroy the virus but inhibit its development. Cognitive resilience, on the other hand, works as a vaccine and seeks to produce enough antibodies so that further ‘viral infections’ can be prevented.

The Geopolitical Dimensions of ‘Corona Diplomacy’

Whilst the 5G case underlines the *internal dangers* of disinformation and the need for cognitive resilience, such threats are reinforced by *external actors* who engage in public diplomacy competition and seek geopolitical gains. Major powers have politicised the COVID-19 crisis, which highlights the very fine line between public diplomacy and disinformation. Direct and open attacks on international institutions and their handling of the pandemic have not only undermined the EU’s communication, but also showcased major powers’ willingness to disrupt global health governance for domestic purposes. The future of European stability thus not only rests on ensuring societal resilience to disinformation and conspiracy theories, but also on confronting external public diplomacy campaigns which threaten European health provisions, economic recovery, and geo-economic strength.

In January and February 2020, Germany alongside France, Latvia, Estonia, and even Italy had sent more than 30 tons of protective equipment to China to support the government’s fight against the virus. However, the EU’s and its Member States’ support did not make the headlines and their response was instead heavily criticised.³⁸⁷ In contrast, the provision of medical supplies by China and Russia to crisis-stricken European countries such as Greece, Italy, and Serbia was very publicly promoted.³⁸⁸ This seemingly ordinary public diplomacy tool has strong geopolitical implications. China’s ‘mask diplomacy’ appears a foreign attempt to portray itself as a humanitarian partner and global leader and to strengthen its political and economic foothold in vulnerable parts of Europe. It is also aimed at domestic consumption, reinforcing the message that the crisis is under control and countering criticism of its own handling of the virus.

China’s ‘mask diplomacy’ was greeted with enthusiasm in the EU’s strategic neighbourhood, exemplified by the case of the Serbian President, who directly and openly contrasted Chinese support with a lack of ‘European solidarity’.³⁸⁹ When reports came out that Chinese assistance to European countries was accompanied by pressure to officially praise Chinese efforts, public backlash ensued.³⁹⁰ Indeed, the politicisation of ‘European solidarity’ touches on a fundamental premise of the European project and therefore represents a core challenge to European ‘resilience’. For this reason, it is also an easy target of influence campaigns, illustrated by

³⁸⁶ Bjola and Papadakis 2020, 6.

³⁸⁷ Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020; Greer 2020; Rankin 2020.

³⁸⁸ Bechev et al. 2020; Hellenic Republic 2020; Sylvers and Pancevski 2020.

³⁸⁹ Euractiv with AFP 2020; Walker 2020.

³⁹⁰ Apuzzo 2020; Bause 2020; European Parliament 2020.

Eurosceptics' and external actors' use of this narrative. In Germany, foreign deception added fuel to right-wing and left-wing conspiracy theories about government plans of exploiting the corona crisis for advancing their powers,³⁹¹ which highlights the dangerous combined effects of internal and external disinformation.

Notwithstanding the perception that European institutions were slow in supplying medical equipment, the European response *was* substantial – but the message did not outplay competing discourses of lack of European solidarity or reaction. Even though the EU's strategic communication efforts are laudable, in particular the East StratCom Task Force's coverage of corona-related disinformation, their impact in the information battle is far from clear. When referring to the team addressing pro-Kremlin disinformation, a senior official from the EEAS already warned last year: 'We need similar but more adapted capacity to deal with the other major challengers of our approaches, which is China. They are much smarter, much sharper.'³⁹²

Simultaneously, 'corona diplomacy' has taken another toll on transatlantic relations, global governance, and multilateralism. The EU is caught in the crossfire of US and Chinese counter-narratives on the crisis, the role of the World Health Organization (WHO), and the paralysis of the UN Security Council, G7, and G20. It becomes clear, as Josep Borrell noted, that the COVID-19 crisis emphasized the need for a multidimensional approach to 'corona diplomacy' which has at its heart 'a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the politics of generosity'.³⁹³ In fact, the lack of US leadership in this crisis constitute an opportunity for the EU to assert itself as a global player providing leadership in critical times.

Conclusion

The corona crisis revealed that disinformation not only poses serious threats to European solidarity and democracy, public trust in institutions, and societal security and stability, but also Europeans' health and Europe's geo-economic strength. Furthermore, it highlighted the fine line between public diplomacy and harmful disinformation, which the EU will need to calibrate in its strategic communication.

Conspiracy theories are a particularly toxic kind of disinformation. Their dissemination is both internalised by the public and reinforced by external actors, which means that they grow rapidly and are extremely difficult to contain. The flourishing of such theories related to COVID-19, such as the 5G hoax, shows the public danger they constitute. In addition, external actors such as China have put the EU's poor strategic communication on the spot by reinforcing conspiracy beliefs and actively promoting their own narrative related to the

³⁹¹ Goßner 2020.

³⁹² Interview with staff from the EEAS StratCom Division, Brussels, July 2019.

³⁹³ EEAS 2020.

pandemic in Europe. These developments must be taken seriously, given their important geopolitical and economic implications.

It is urgent that the EU rethinks its strategic communication policy. Investing in societal resilience through media literacy, educational campaigns, and support for high-quality journalism, should remain a policy priority. However, binding ethically-guided pre-emptive measures capable of containing and neutralising disinformation campaigns and foreign influence operations in real-time is also critical. More than adapting to the digital milieu, the EU must act as the gatekeeper of Europeans' safety and stability by designing an impactful online governance framework.