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влияние достоверности
сообщений на поведение
человека во время пандемии
COVID-19

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and Fake News:
Effects of Message
Credibility on Human
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This monograph analyzes one of the key phenomena of our time — the influence of false information on human behavior during the COVID-19 crisis. Issues of trust in information, resilience to disinformation, and the formation of public behavior in the digital age extend far beyond a single crisis and touch upon all aspects of modern society. The author employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining socio-logical, behavioral, and communication analysis methods, consistently uncovering the theoretical foundations of the concepts of "rumors," "fake news," and "conspiracy theories," focusing on the specifics of their dissemination on social media. The findings on the relationship between susceptibility to rumors and fake news and individual characteristics (age, presence of children, level of trust in the government, etc.) are of scientific value. The author also identifies patterns of behavior under conditions of information uncertainty. These results provide a starting point for developing effective crisis communication strategies, including government measures to combat disinformation.

For specialists in the field of sociology and social psychology.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the Corona virus has reached from China to more than one hundred other countries in only two months. Media daily reported actual news regarding the number of infected people, the number of recovered people and finally the number of deceased.¹ On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak as a pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not just a global health crisis; it was an information crisis, a battle over truth and trust. As the virus spread across borders, so did waves of news, government briefings, and scientific updates. But alongside verified reports came a flood of misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories. Some people believed in outlandish claims — such as the virus being a bioweapon, a hoax, or a government plot — while others placed their trust in science and followed public health measures. What drove these differences in belief? Why did some individuals accept misinformation so readily while others rejected it? This research seeks to answer these pressing questions by exploring the role of misinformation in shaping human behavior during the pandemic.

When the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in late 2019, the world was unprepared for the scale of the crisis that would follow. Within two months, the virus had spread from China to over one hundred countries. Countries reacted with different measures in order to prevent a further spread of the virus. At least, there was no reliable vaccine against COVID-19 from the beginning

¹ *De Ceukelaire, W. We need strong public health care to contain the global Corona pandemic / W. De Ceukelaire, C. Bodini // International Journal of Health Services. — 2020. — Vol. 50. — No. 3. — P. 276.*

of the pandemic up to spring 2021. Even nowadays, COVID-19 vaccines cannot provide one hundred percent protection.

Hence, Governments scrambled to contain the outbreak, imposing lockdowns, closing borders, and enforcing strict public health measures. In Germany, a nationwide lockdown was ordered on March 16, 2020. Public life has been shut down and daily life came to a standstill — shops closed, events were canceled, flights were grounded, and people were urged to stay at home. The term “social distancing” quickly became one of the most used terms in the media and part of everyday language.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered how people interacted with information. As fear and uncertainty grew, so did the public’s reliance on media for updates. News have been dominated by virologists, live coverage of infection rates, recovery numbers, deaths and up to date, there is no consensus among experts, whether the ordered measures of the German government can be called reasonable and justified or not.

Social media became a lifeline for real-time information. But it also became a breeding ground for misinformation. Alongside scientific reports and government statements, people were exposed to viral posts claiming COVID-19 was no more dangerous than the flu, that masks were ineffective, or that vaccines contained microchips. Some of these claims spread organically, fueled by fear and confusion. Others were deliberately manufactured, often for political or financial gain. In an environment of uncertainty and fear, distinguishing between fact and fiction became increasingly challenging.

The digital age has revolutionized how we access and share information, particularly during crises. Unlike traditional media, where journalists and editors verify stories before publication, social media allows anyone to post content without fact-checking.

A single tweet, video, or meme can go viral in minutes, reaching millions of people before authorities can respond. During the pandemic, this dynamic had profound consequences. Misinformation about COVID-19 took many forms. Some narratives downplayed the severity of the virus, while others exaggerated it. Conspiracy theories flourished — some claimed that 5G technology was responsible for the outbreak, while others argued that the pandemic was orchestrated to control the population. These theories were not confined to the fringes of the internet; they gained traction among large audiences, shaping public perceptions and influencing real-world behavior. The COVID-19 pandemic was not just a battle against a virus; it became a war on truth itself.

Despite the fact that the spread of misinformation is not a new challenge, the pandemic amplified its reach and consequences. The lines between credible reporting and misleading content blurred, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Understanding the psychology behind why people believe and share misinformation is not just an academic exercise; it is vital for designing better communication strategies, public health policies, and digital literacy initiatives.

Psychological research shows that people are more likely to accept information that aligns with their existing beliefs, a tendency known as confirmation bias. If someone distrusts pharmaceutical companies, they may be more receptive to claims that vaccines are unsafe. If they believe governments are corrupt, they may find conspiracy theories about pandemic cover-ups more plausible. Additionally, misinformation often appeals to emotions rather than logic. Fear, anger, and uncertainty make people more vulnerable to misleading narratives. A study by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral found that false information spreads faster than true

information because it is often more sensational.¹ During a crisis like COVID-19, when people were desperate for answers, emotionally charged misinformation thrived.

Social identity also plays a key role. People tend to trust information shared by those in their social or political circles. If a trusted friend or influencer shares a misleading claim, individuals are more likely to believe it. This effect was evident during the pandemic, as misinformation spread through online communities, reinforcing existing worldviews and creating echo chambers where falsehoods went unchallenged. Public behavior was deeply influenced by these dynamics. Throughout the pandemic, false claims affected people's willingness to follow public health guidelines. In some cases, misinformation led individuals to reject mask mandates, ignore lockdown rules, or refuse vaccinations. It fueled protests against government restrictions and, in some cases, even acts of violence against healthcare workers.

The consequences of misinformation extended beyond public health. Trust in institutions — governments, media, and scientific organizations—was severely tested. In some countries, political leaders downplayed the threat of COVID-19, leading to divisions in public opinion. In others, misinformation campaigns were used as a tool for political manipulation. The erosion of trust made it even harder to implement effective health policies, as many people no longer knew whom to believe.

This book takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how misinformation shaped public behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from sociology, media studies, and psychology, it examines the mechanics of fake news, the psychological factors that make individuals susceptible to it, and the role of social media

¹ Vosoughi, S. The spread of true and false news online / S. Vosoughi, D. Roy, S. Aral // *Science*. — 2018. — Vol. 359. — No. 6380. — P. 1146–1151.

in amplifying misleading narratives. At its core, this research investigates why some individuals embraced and spread false narratives while others rejected them. How did social media amplify rumors? How did government policies shape public perception? This study addresses these questions by exploring the nature of fake news, the psychological mechanisms behind belief formation, and the role of digital platforms in the spread of misinformation. It also examines the societal impact of these narratives, from influencing health behaviors to shaping institutional trust. Finally, it offers insights into recognizing, counteracting, and preventing misinformation in future crises, ensuring that truth prevails in moments of uncertainty.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on misinformation by refining theories on media influence, persuasion, and trust in digital environments. It underscores the dual role of social media as both a tool for disseminating accurate information and a vehicle for spreading falsehoods. Unlike previous studies that focus on media credibility in general, this research specifically examines the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study in misinformation dynamics. By analyzing real-world examples and empirical data, it provides insights into the shifting nature of public trust during crises. Furthermore, it introduces new hypotheses on the role of psychological traits, social group dynamics, and political attitudes in determining susceptibility to misinformation.

The first section of this book provides a theoretical foundation, outlining key concepts related to misinformation, media influence, and human behavior. It discusses existing literature on fake news, cognitive biases, and social media dynamics. The second section presents empirical findings, drawing from surveys and case studies to illustrate how misinformation shaped individual and collective responses during the pandemic. The final section offers

recommendations for combating misinformation, emphasizing the importance of media literacy, transparent communication strategies, and regulatory measures for digital platforms. By exploring the mechanisms of misinformation, this book aims to equip readers with the tools to critically evaluate information in an era of rapid digital communication. Understanding how misinformation spreads — and why people believe it — is essential not only for navigating future crises but also for strengthening democratic institutions and public trust in science.

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Слухи и фейковые новости: влияние достоверности сообщений на поведение человека во время пандемии COVID-19

Оливер Харальд Кемпкенс

Монография посвящена исследованию воздействия дезинформации на общественное поведение в период пандемии COVID-19. Основная цель исследования — проанализировать, как слухи и фейковые новости, распространяемые в социальных сетях, влияли на поведение общества, соблюдение санитарных мер и доверие к государственным институтам. В исследовании разработана теоретическая основа, определены ключевые понятия, такие как слухи, фейковые новости, достоверность и поведение людей в условиях кризиса. Рассмотрено развитие дезинформации в период пандемии на примере Германии, анализируются реакции различных демографических групп на слухи, дезинформацию и меры, принимаемые правительством для борьбы с пандемией. Был применён смешанный метод исследований с преобладанием количественного анализа, основанного на онлайн-опросе, проведённом в период с января по июнь 2021 года. В исследовании изучается степень влияния достоверности сообщений, личных качеств и медиапотребления на такие аспекты поведения, как соблюдение карантинных мер, вера в теории заговора и отношение к вакцинации. Основные выводы показывают, что люди с низким доверием к властям и высоким уровнем тревожности относительно вируса были более восприимчивы к дезинформации. Монография вносит вклад в область коммуникации в здравоохранении, предлагая рекомендации по управлению слухами и дезинформацией во время кризисов. Особое внимание уделяется важности прозрачности и детализированности сообщений от доверенных источников. Исследование также предлагает политические рекомендации по улучшению кризисной коммуникации и регулированию социальных сетей.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:

пандемия коронавируса, COVID-19, слухи, фейковые новости, поведение человека, сопротивление, ограничения, критическое отношение, меры по смягчению последствий, социальные сети

KEYWORDS:

Corona pandemic, COVID-19, rumours, fake news, human behaviour, resistance, restrictions, critical attitude, mitigation measures, social media

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НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

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Effects of Message Credibility
on Human Behavior During
the COVID-19 Pandemic

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