

WHAT HAS THE COVID-19 INFODEMIC TOLD US ABOUT THE CZECH DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM?

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When talking about the COVID-19 crisis at the 2020 Munich Security Conference, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), stressed the need to tackle its by-product – the so-called *infodemic*. What Mr. Ghebreyesus was referring to was the overflow of information related to the pandemic, much of which was inaccurate and even deceiving. He argued that this phenomenon poses a serious challenge for the WHO, as well as national governments, since the ability to communicate with the population is crucial to tackling the disease. The information overload, however, has had an equally dire impact on individuals for whom the inability to find correct information often proved to be harmful, even fatal.

To make things worse, the COVID-19 pandemic was abused by various platforms spreading conspiracy theories which – like the rest of the media – dedicated significant attention to this issue. Fear and anxiety made the spread of hoaxes and false alarms among the general population significantly more widespread than under normal conditions.

To assist in the effort to understand this problem, PSSI has started to map the coverage of the pandemic by eight websites notorious for spreading disinformation and other problematic content. Our work, as well as other projects conducted by Czech experts, focused on disinformation (for instance the Initiative c19 Dezininfoservis), allowing us to identify and debunk potentially harmful narratives before they started to spread in the information environment. It also served as an advanced warning for relevant stakeholders such as the media, policy decision-makers, and operators of social networks.

PSSI did not only seek to provide early warnings, however, but rather sought to improve the understanding of the Czech disinformation ecosystem. Since the attention of the whole information space was focused on one issue – the pandemic – it was easier to uncover not only Covid-19 related narratives, but also patterns of behavior, sources and editorial practices of platforms spreading conspiracies. Not surprisingly, all eight analyzed websites established the COVID-19 pandemic as a major topic. Between March and May 2020, they produced more than 2,600 articles focused on this issue, which is approximately 57% of all content published in this period.

Avoiding the general approach of designating all platforms promulgating problematic content with the vague label “disinformation sites”, PSSI research demonstrated that the analyzed websites treated the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic very differently. Generally, it was possible to group them into three distinct categories:

- Quasi-media platforms
- Blogosphere
- Conspiracy sites

Quasi-media platforms attempted to present themselves as standard online news outlets and provided the most unbiased coverage of ongoing events among analyzed platforms. They did not manipulate their audiences with complete

falsehoods, but their bias was visible from their choices of headlines or the attention that was dedicated to various events. An illustrative example is their coverage of Russian humanitarian assistance provided to Italy, which was not only quite prominently covered, but also accompanied by promotional materials like photo galleries and videos.

Websites creating their own blogosphere that involve mainly heavily biased commentaries, were not much interested in the pandemic itself, but rather attempted to portray this event to present their worldview. Hence, COVID-19 was used as another argument for the criticism of the European Union or irresponsible liberal Czech citizens.

Unlike the two categories described above, only conspiracy websites published outright lies and dubious and extravagant theories in significant volume. Interestingly, most of them were not related to the current Czech situation, but focused on global events and reiterated messages taken from abroad. Arguably, that shows a certain lack of innovativeness on the part of Czech conspiracy theorists.

Other differences were detected as well. While some of the websites published almost solely their own content, others mostly republished articles from a wide variety of sources. Some portals even looked for their content abroad and were able to introduce into the Czech debates (dis)information from English or Russian-speaking environments. The diversity found between these websites is consistent with PSSI's previous [research findings](#) (analyzing the business model of platforms spreading conspiracy theories and other problematic content) that there are also different motivations beyond the existence of these sites. While, for some, their existence is a product of the ambition to promote their ideological worldview in a given information space, for others their purpose is to raise money from clicks by attracting as many readers as possible by publishing outrageous and emotionally loaded content.

Understanding the different nature of various platforms spreading conspiracy theories is crucial for the crafting of appropriate strategies to tackle them. For instance, the impact of websites spreading complete falsehoods might be tackled by fact-checking, which, in an ideal case, might result in the limitation of their reach on social media. On the other hand, in the case of websites pretending to present mainstream media content and manipulating audiences in a less-obvious manner, the response needs to be less direct. For instance, there should be an effort to exclude them from the public debate (e.g. prominent public figures refuse to give them an interview, etc.) or disrupt their business model by convincing private companies not to advertise on them.

The virus of conspiracy theories is likely to remain a parasite on our information space for the foreseeable future. A vaccine in the form of better media education or addressing social problems exploited by conspiracies is still far away. Therefore, it is important to focus on a number of steps that are achievable now. Finally, a better understanding of those responsible for spreading this disease is a good start for the preparation of the next issue of global scale. COVID-19 has offered excellent conditions for getting it right next time.