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Challenges of the "New Hybrid Ecosystem": Celebrities, Fake News and COVID-19

Abstract

The complex intertwining of mainstream and social media has resulted in the creation of a "new hybrid ecosystem" in which consumers are primarily engaged with ideas and news posted on social media, that are then transmitted as news in mainstream media (Wheeler 2018). In this new "hyper-connected environment" (Pepper 2018), "fake news" occupies a specific position. The concept of "fake news" is very complex, contradictory and ambivalent because it appears as an umbrella term covering various phenomena and different practices of which some are already known, while others are fairly new (Molina et al. 2021). The new communication environment and the role of fake news as part of it, may also be analysed through the celebrity phenomenon. This paper uses the method of discourse analysis to examine texts on various statements by celebrities

about COVID-19, published on two web portals in Croatia (index.hr, 24sata.hr). It becomes clear that celebrities function as very potent sharers of fake news, since consumers of online content give great weight to their actions and statements. On the other hand, mainstream media often act as a corrective to social media, in their efforts to convincingly deny fake news and the celebrities that share them on social media.

Key words: *new hybrid ecosystem, fake news, celebrities, COVID-19, discourse analysis, index.hr, 24sata.hr.*

Introduction

On 12 March 2020, Tom Hanks, the famous Hollywood actor, shared on his Instagram account that he is in Australia with his wife Rita Wilson, that they have both tested positive for the coronavirus, and are following all public health and safety protocols (testing-observation-isolation). The post became viral almost immediately and was shared as a news item by all media corporations – CNN (12 March, Gonzalez 2020)[1], Washington Post (12 March, Rao, Butler and du Lac 2020)[2], BBC (12 March 2020.)[3], The New York Times (17 March, Sperling 2020)[4]. This is just one among many examples of the phenomenon Mark Wheeler[5] calls the "new hybrid ecosystem", created through a complex exchange between traditional/mainstream media and social media. Wheeler[6] explains how this "hybridisation of social and mainstream media" relates to three phenomena:

1 Sandra Gonzalez "Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson diagnosed with coronavirus", *CNN Entertainment*, 12 March 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/11/entertainment/tom-hanks-rita-wilson-coronavirus/index.html Accessed: 15 December 2021.

2 Sonia Rao, Bethonie Butler and J. Freedom du Lac "Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson have tested positive for coronavirus", *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/03/11/tom-hanks-coronavirus-rita-wilson/ Accessed: 15 December 2021.

3 Anonymous "Tom Hanks coronavirus: Actor and wife Rita Wilson test positive", *BBC*, 12 March 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-51847198 Accessed: 15 December 2021.

4 Nicole Sperling "Tom Hanks Says He Has Coronavirus", *the New York Times*, 17 March 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/business/media/tom-hanks-coronavirus.html Accessed: 15 December 2021.

5 Mark Wheeler, "Celebrity politics in the fake news age", in *A Carter-Ruck Report: Fake News – Authentic Views*, pp. 31-34, https://www.carter-ruck.com/insight/fakes-news-authentic-views/celebrity-politics-in-the-fake-news-age/ Accessed: 25 August 2020. Quoted line on p. 31.

6 M. Wheeler, "Celebrity politics in the fake news age", p. 31.

1. The overall change in the way in which information is consumed – readers engage with ideas they first encounter on social networks (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp)[7] and only subsequently with information published in mainstream media. Recent studies have shown that Facebook is "one of the preferred sources" for news, chosen in particular by the younger generation;[8]
2. Some articles in mainstream media (newspapers, tv, web portals) are based on stories/posts/tweets that have become viral, Wheeler notes[9] i.e., due to their viral characteristics and reactions by the public, they are construed into a news item after first being published on social networks;
3. A "vicious circle" of news reporting is created, "raising the profile of specific ideas" but at the same time helping to "construct those ideas" regardless of whether they are true or not, and whether they are reported "in context or out of context", Wheeler concludes.[10]

Wheeler's concept of a "new hybrid system" is important in terms of this paper for two reasons: 1) it points to the phenomenon of transferring ideas from the digital universe of social media into the digital and print universe of mainstream media, where posts by celebrities made visible for specific reasons (such as their provocativeness, controversy, relevance, sensationalism etc.) become viral and are shared as fake news in mainstream media; 2) Some of the ideas circulating in this new "hyper-connected environment" as Pepper[11] calls it, are not based on reality/facts, cannot be checked and have been identified and classified as fake news.

Citing numerous instances of research, De Coninck et al. note that the "digital media ecosystem – with its socially networked architecture, trolls, and automated bots" is a hotbed for fake news, "mis- and disinformation, such as conspiracy theories".[12]

The following part of the paper analyses fake news in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then presents research results on the news coverage of the pandemic and the involvement of celebrities.

7 Baptista and Gradim quote Gragnani who notes that in the 2018 election in Brazil, WhatsApp "was the most used tool to spread fake news", which means that in Brazil, WhatsApp is not only a messaging app, but is also used as a social network "that can influence political ideologies" (Gragnani cited in Baptista and Gradim 2020, p. 5). See: João Pedro Baptista and Anabela Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", *Social Sciences* MDPI, 9(10/2020), pp. 1-22, https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jscscx/v9y2020i10p185-d429198.html Accessed: 22 August 2020.

8 J. P. Baptista and A, Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 5.

9 M. Wheeler, "Celebrity politics in the fake news age", p. 31.

10 Ibid, p. 31.

11 Alasdair Pepper, "Removing fake content from the Internet", in *A Carter-Ruck Report: Fake News – Authentic Views*, p. 17, https://www.carter-ruck.com/insight/fakes-news-authentic-views/celebrity-politics-in-the-fake-news-age/. Accessed: 25 August 2020.

12 David De Coninck, Thomas Frissen, Koen Matthijs, Leen d´Haenend, Grégoire Lits, Olivier Champagne-Poirier, Marie-Eve Carignan, Marc D. David, Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel, Sébastien Salerno and Melissa Généreux, "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16 April 2021, pp. 1-13, https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646394/full. Accessed: 17 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 2.

Fake news: a short history of the phenomenon

The concept of "fake news" or "fabricated information"[13] is extremely complex because it is used as an umbrella term covering different phenomena of which some have already been known while others are more recent.[14] False information, misinformation and rumours are old social and cultural phenomena well documented throughout history.[15] However, only in the 20th century have these phenomena caught the attention of the scientific community. Galit Hasan-Rokem[16] notes that "initially they were examined in the context of modernity", or more precisely, mass media (newspaper, radio, television), and then increasingly the Internet, which has become a platform for the construction, distribution, popularization and consumption of all kinds of misinformation.

Before the advent of mass media and the Internet, rumours and invented narratives were construed and disseminated, seeping into the political, religious, legal and everyday life, with "real social consequences".[17] Burkhardt[18] for example, mentions the case of a Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea [500. – ca. 554. AD] who after the death of Emperor Justinian discredited him through fake news, unverifiable and baseless stories [since he did not fear retaliation, questioning, or investigation] despite being his supporter during the emperor's lifetime. Campion-Vincent[19] cites Bercé's description of accusations from the times of the plague epidemic in Pre-Revolutionary France and cholera in the 19th century, of "voluntary spreaders of the illness, poisoners of fountains, greasers of door knobs, perverse doctors, nurses or grave diggers, [and] killing vaccine"). In their research *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947) Allport and Postman "adopt the disease metaphor" characteristic of "spreading a rumour as viral"[20] where research points to "powerful and potentially

13 Maria D. Molina, S. Shyam Sundar, Thai Le, Dongwon Lee, "'Fake News' Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content", *American Behavioral Scientist* 65 (2/2021), pp. 180-212, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002764219878224 Accessed: 12 August 2021.

14 M. D. Molina et al., "'Fake News' Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content", p. 184.

15 Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Rumors in Times of War and Cataclysm. A Historical Perspective", in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, London, pp. 31-52.
Hasan-Rokem states it is possible to differentiate between "modern rumours" and "ancient rumours". Quoted line on p. 33.

16 Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Rumors in Times of War and Cataclysm. A Historical Perspective", p. 31.

17 Jody Enders, "Dramatic Rumors and Truthful Appearances: The Medieval Myth of Ritual Murder by Proxy", in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, London, pp. 15-30. Quoted line on p. 15.

18 Joanna M. Burkhardt, "Combating Fake News in the Digital Age", *ALA American Library Association, Library Technology Reports* 53(8/2017), pp. 5-33, https://journals.ala.org/index.php/ltr/issue/viewIssue/662/423 Accessed: 5 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 5.

19 Véronique Campion-Vincent, "From Evil Others to Evil Elites: A Dominant Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today", in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, London, pp. 103-122. Quoted from p. 109.

20 Allport and Postman cited in Véronique Campion-Vincent, "Introduction", in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, London, pp. 11-14. Quoted line on p. 11.

catastrophic results that rumours may have for individuals as well as groups"[21]. Jody Enders[22] notes that the medieval public had the possibility of "consuming fictional and non-fictional information in countless ways" – through religious sermons, royal announcements shouted by messengers on the streets, discussions by prosecutors and advocates on public trials and through medieval theatrical performances.[23] The invention of the press and the democratization of literacy enabled different types of information to spread more quickly which finally led to the economical possibility and feasibility of writing and of selling information.[24] In this analysis it is important to keep in mind the issue of power – the control of the production and dissemination of information is fundamental for maintaining the current order and the political, economic, social and cultural reality.[25] The development of mass media (radio, television) in the 20th century enabled new ways of creating and disseminating news (both true and false), as well as the establishment of a new journalism ethics and professional code which required multiple verification of information before being published.[26] The internet era and the development of digital technology have introduced us to completely new tools and ways to construct and disseminate false news and fabricated information.[27] Li and Su note that in US media, fake news has related to "muckraking" and sensationalism since the late 19th century, but in the last two decades, the term has been used for "genres that mimic the style of traditional news" with the added use of "irony and humour" for the purposes of "implicit critique of politics and social subjects" (e.g. news satire and news parody).[28] Fake and satirical "hoax websites" were first listed within the fun, parody or satire categories, and only later due to their content and motive became part of misinformation and misdirection.[29] The popularity of the term "fake news" is related to the 2016 presidential election in the US, when Hillary Clinton started mentioning the concept of fake news in her campaign, while Trump increasingly used it in his tweets[30] when he attacked and accused mainstream media of hostility and sharing false information.[31] One of the

21 G. Hasan-Rokem, "Rumors in Times of War and Cataclysm. A Historical Perspective", p. 32.

22 J. Enders, "Dramatic Rumors and Truthful Appearances: The Medieval Myth of Ritual Murder by Proxy", p. 15.

23 In the article "Dramatic Rumors and Truthful Appearances: The Medieval Myth of Ritual Murder by Proxy" (2005), Enders states that one antisemitic legend staged as a play in the 15th century, under the title *Misterie de la Sainte Hostie/The Mystery of the Holy Host*, played out the drama of a fallen Christian widow burnt at the stake for a ritual infanticide after conspiring with a Jewish money-lender in order to "test and torture" Christ as embodied in the Holy Host (pp. 15-16). It should be noted that this play follows a Parisian legend from 1290. The antisemitic motif of a bloodthirsty Jew and ritual killings of Christian babies for their lifesaving blood, was common in "creating, promoting and encouraging intolerance, discrimination and abuse" towards members of the Jewish community (p. 16).

24 J. M. Burkhardt, "Combating Fake News in the Digital Age", pp. 5-6.

25 Ibid., p. 5.

26 Ibid., p. 6.

27 Ibid., pp. 6, 7.

28 Jianing Li and Min-Hsin Su, "Real Talk About Fake News: Identity Language and Disconnected Networks of the US Public's 'Fake News' Discourse on Twitter", *Social Media + Society* (April-June/2020), pp. 1–14, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305120916841 Accessed: 6 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 2.

29 J. M. Burkhardt, "Combating Fake News in the Digital Age", pp. 7, 8.

30 J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 3.

31 J. Li and M.-H. Su, "Real Talk About Fake News: Identity Language and Disconnected Networks of the US Public's 'Fake News' Discourse on Twitter", p. 2.

basic characteristics of the current information and media environment is the primacy of social media in disseminating information and the loss of monopoly held by traditional gatekeepers.[32]

One of the fundamental and important issues in analysing and researching fake news is the matter of precisely defining and classifying fake news. After selecting and analysing 52 research articles (among a total group of 419 articles), Baptista and Gradim[33] developed a systematic and clear examination of the fake news phenomenon, that is, of its structure and virality, as well as the profile of consumers. The authors emphasize "epistemic problems" and the lack of a "univocal definition" as well as the different meanings of the concept of fake news.[34] Baptista and Gradim for example refer to Habgood-Coote[35], who claims that the concept of fake news has no "stable meaning and changes depending on different contexts", while Molina et al. cite Lazer et al. in their emphasis on the "importance of the process and intention" when conceptualizing fake news. They also quote Jack who compares fake news to other types of "problematic information" (ranging from disinformation to propaganda).[36] In the context of clarifying the terminology of fake news, Molina et al. challenge the concept of fake news since the term "has become highly political".[37] It is also important to note that the European Commission report uses the term "disinformation", and "covers a broader spectrum" of false information in various formats (memes, text manipulation) which deliberately aim to deceive.[38] In recent years, an increasing number of authors have emphasized that "fake news" is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon which cannot be simplified and reduced to "false information.[39] David De Coninck et al. (2021)[40] consider fake news to be:

1. misinformation i.e., "publishing wrong information without meaning to be wrong or having a political purpose in communicating false information";
2. "disinformation (or conspiracy theories)" as defined by Benkler et al, deals with "manipulating and misleading people intentionally to achieve political ends"[41], or more specifically, according to Douglas et al, the goals of "disinformation and conspiracy theories" are to

32 M. D. Molina et al., "'Fake News' Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content", p. 183.
33 J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 2.
34 Ibid, p. 2.
35 Ibid, p. 4.
36 M. D. Molina et al., "'Fake News' Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content", p. 181.
37 Ibid, p. 184.
38 J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 4.
39 M. D. Molina et al., "'Fake News' Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content", pp. 182, 184.
40 D. De Coninck et al., "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources", p. 2.
41 Benkler et al. cited in D. De Coninck et al, "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources", p. 2.

"explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors".[42]

Li and Scott refer to Jaster and Lanius who define fake news as "news that does mischief with the truth in that it exhibits both (a) a lack of truth and (b) a lack of truthfulness",[43] while Wardle and Derakhshan note that fake news consists of 3 categories: misinformation – "information that is false, but it is believed to be true by individuals disseminating the news", disinformation – "the intentional dissemination of information known to be false", and mal-information – "the intentional use of true information to cause harm on a person, organization, or country".[44] For some authors rather, fake news is reduced to "an article that mimics the format of a news story or report, with fake content that was created with the intent to deceive".[45] Research shows that modern fake news most often spreads through social networks with the final goal of becoming viral – some authors note that fake news does not have to be entirely false.[46] Based on analysed texts about fake news, Baptista and Gradim[47] suggest the following definition of fake news:

"a type of online disinformation, with totally or partially false content, created intentionally to deceive and/or manipulate a specific audience, through a format that imitates a news or report (...) through false information that may or may not be associated with real events, with an opportunistic structure (title, image, content) to attract the readers' attention and to persuade them to believe in falsehood, in order to obtain more clicks and shares, therefore, higher advertising revenue and/or ideological gain".

Considering the motivation of consumers and those who share texts with false information and disinformation, this happens for a variety of reasons: attention seeking, social approval, party and ideological beliefs, the wish to inform friends, have fun, create chaos etc.[48] The issue of finding "who consumes fake news" has obviously been intriguing the scientific community in recent months and years. Research findings provide different types of answers. Some researchers[49] [50] note that the public

42 Ibid, p. 2.

43 Bo Li and Olan Scott, "Fake News Travels Fast: Exploring Misinformation Circulated Around Wu Lei's Coronavirus Case", *International Journal of Sport Communication*, (13/2020), pp. 505–513, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Fake-News-Travels-Fast%3A-Exploring-Misinformation-Wu-Li-Scott/fc325e2509a77da46ea525b8ad180bbdeaae5081 Accessed: 6 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 506.

44 Wardle and Derakhshan quoted in B. Li and O. Scott, "Fake News Travels Fast: Exploring Misinformation Circulated Around Wu Lei's Coronavirus Case", pp. 506, 508.

45 J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 4.

46 Ibid., p. 5.

47 Ibid., p. 5.

48 Ibid., pp. 5, 6.

49 Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler and Joshua Tucker, "Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook", Science Advances, pp. 1-8, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330282199_Less_than_you_think_Prevalence_and_predictors_of_fake_news_dissemination_on_Facebook. Accessed: 7 August 2021.

50 Daniel Halpern, Sebastián Valenzuela, James Katz and Juan Pablo Miranda, "From Belief in Conspiracy Theories to Trust in Others: Which Factors Influence Exposure, Believing and Sharing Fake News", in Gabriele Meiselwitz (ed.) *Social Computing and Social Media. Design, Human Behavior and Analytics*, Springer, Cham 2019, pp. 217-232.

that consumes fake news is "smaller than the real news audience"[51], but also that "the audience that consumes fake news is not only limited to filter bubbles and echo chambers".[52] Research shows that fake news is more often consumed (and shared) by the older population, those with a lower level of education, those with high levels of neuroticism and extroversion, those who no longer believe mainstream media, and supporters of extremist ideologies (both left- and right- wing).[53] [54] [55] Campion-Vincent refers to Gladwell who states that "increased suspicion" of "legitimate sources of information"[56] and distrust of traditional news media leads to a selective exposure to news[57] and increases the use of alternative sources, such as digital media that distribute disinformation.[58] [59]

The research by Vosoughi, Roy and Aral[60] [61] on the spread of false and true news through Twitter in the period from 2006 to 2017 is important in this context. The classification of falsity or truth was based on using information from six fact-checking organizations (snopes.com, politifact.com, factcheck.org, truthorfiction.com, hoax-slayer.com, and urbanlegends.about.com).[62] The research concluded the following: 1) fake news are shared "much further, faster, deeper and to a wider scope" than true news; 2) There is a 70% greater chance that fake news will be shared (retweeted); 3) fake news is perceived as more recent (which means that its truthfulness is not the most important); 4) people are the key factor in the spread of fake news – "robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate".[63]

51 J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 11.

52 Nelson and Taneja cited in J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", p. 11.

53 In their article "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review" Baptista and Gradim list research results according to which liberals "tend to be more analytical than conservatives", who in turn are more prone to consuming fake news, which is also true for those with right-wing preferences ("have a greater tendency to reject complex topics and are more dependent on implicit reasoning") (p. 12).

54 J. P. Baptista and A. Gradim, "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review", pp. 11-13.

55 Uscinski et al. (2016) determined that Democrats and Republicans are equally predisposed to accept conspiracy theories, but most sources claim that right-wing individuals relate more to conspiracy theories and trust/consume/share fake news more often (See, Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions". *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (2016), pp. 57–71.).

56 V. Campion-Vincent, "From Evil Others to Evil Elites: A Dominant Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today", p. 117.

57 Briony Swire, Adam J. Berinsky, Stephan Lewandowsky and Ullrich K. H. Ecker, "Processing Political Misinformation: Comprehending the Trump Phenomenon", *Royal Society Open Science* 4 (160802/2017), pp. 1-21, https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsos.160802. Accessed: 29 December 2021.

58 Svenja Boberg, Thorsten Quandt, Tim Schatto-Eckrodt and Lena Frischlich, "Pandemic Populism: Facebook Pages of Alternative News Media and the Corona Crisis -- A Computational Content Analysis", *Muenster Online Research* (MOR), Working paper (1/21), pp. 1-21, https://arxiv.org/pdf/2004.02566.pdf. Accessed: 18 August 2021.

59 D. De Coninck et al., "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources".

60 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of true and false news online", MIT Initiative on the digital economy research brief, pp. 1-5, https://ide.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2017-IDE-Research-Brief-False-News.pdf. Accessed: 17 August 2021.

61 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, "The spread of true and false news online", *Science* 359 (6380/2018), pp. 1146-1151, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aap9559 Accessed: 16 August 2021.

62 S. Vosoughi, D. Roy and S. Aral, "The Spread of true and false news online", pp. 1, 2.

63 Ibid, pp. 1, 3.

Fake news, conspiracy theories and COVID-19

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists, politicians, the media, and other socially relevant actors have been warning about the spread and increased visibility of "other viral phenomena like misinformation, conspiracy theories, and general mass suspicions about what is really going on" regarding the pandemic.[64]

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized the emerging "infodemic" caused by the inflation of information ("including false or misleading information")[65] which circulate during the pandemic period throughout the digital and physical space, causing: 1) "confusion and risk-taking behaviours" that have or might have negative health consequences[66]; 2) doubt towards and mistrust of health experts; 3) the undermining of healthcare measures and efforts to suppress the spread of COVID-19.[67] Some dominant narratives shared by many fake news and conspiracy theories claim that the coronavirus has been caused by 5G technology or that Bill Gates is manipulating the coronavirus in order to gain control over humanity through global vaccinations and surveillance using microchips.[68] Even though these narratives have been publicly exposed as untrue and as misinformation, fake news and narratives based on conspiracy theories continue to circulate the public arena and may have serious consequences.[69] In the UK for example, technicians and British Telecom engineers were attacked by supporters of ideas generally equated to conspiracy theories[70]. Vincent notes that most incidents may be "classified as harassment" (e.g., name-calling, death threats etc.), but there were even more violent attacks that endangered the physical integrity of the employees.[71] According to data by Mobile UK, in 2020 from the end of March to the beginning of June "there were more than 200 incidents of abuse against telecoms engineers and more than 90 arson attacks" planted on mobile infrastructure.[72]

In addition to violent incidents and destruction of mobile infrastructure, fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 have a range of other sociological and health-related consequences: stigmatization and discrimination; suspicion and/or reduced trust in government

64 D. De Coninck et al., "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources", p. 1.

65 World Health Organization, "Infodemic", https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1 Accessed: 17 August 2021.

66 B. Li and O. Scott, "Fake News Travels Fast: Exploring Misinformation Circulated Around Wu Lei's Coronavirus Case", p. 505.

67 World Health Organization, "Infodemic".

68 D. De Coninck et al., "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources", p. 2.

69 Ibid, p. 2.

70 Ibid, p. 2.

71 James Vincent, "Something in the air. Conspiracy theorists say 5G causes novel coronavirus, so now they´re harassing and attacking UK telecom engineers", *The Verge*, 3 June 2020, https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/3/21276912/5g-conspiracy-theories-coronavirus-uk-telecoms-engineers-attacks-abuse Accessed: 19 August 2021.

72 J. Vincent, "Something in the air. Conspiracy theorists say 5G causes novel coronavirus, so now they´re harassing and attacking UK telecom engineers".

institutions and health authorities; not following prescribed preventive measures (e.g. the refusal to wear a mask in a public space, not keeping the physical/social distance etc.); consuming medically unapproved concoctions marketed and promoted through social networks as preventive measures against the coronavirus and/or medicine in case of disease (e.g. many people consumed highly concentrated alcohol [methanol] in the belief this would disinfect their bodies and kill the virus, which resulted in deaths, hospitalizations and complete blindness).[73] Recent cases related to COVID-19 as well as misinformation created and disseminated in the pre-pandemic period, reveal that fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories are not merely virtual phenomena, but can also have very concrete individual and collective consequences, which is why they need to be researched and analysed in the socio-cultural, historical, economic and political context.[74]

In their study "Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation", Brennen et al.[75] formed "an inductive typology of statements shared as part of COVID-19 misinformation" (partially cited in the original format):

73 Md Saiful Islam, Tonmoy Sarkar, Sazzad Hossain Khan, Abu-Hena Mostofa Kamal, S. M. Murshid Hasan, Alamgir Kabir, Dalia Yeasmin, Mohammad Ariful Islam, Kamal Ibne Amin Chowdhury, Kazi Selim Anwar, Abrar Ahmad Chughtai and Holly Seale, "COVID-19–Related Infodemic and Its Impact on Public Health: A Global Social Media Analysis", *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 103(4/2020), pp. 1621–1629, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7543839/ Accessed: 21 August 2021. Quoted line on pp. 1622, 1624.

74 Feldman-Savelsberg, Ndonko and Yang describe the public health and political consequences of rumours (and conspiracy theories) relating to vaccinations in Cameroon where it is important to take into account the historical, political and socio-cultural context (p. 141) for understanding "reproductive rumours". Collective memory related to the colonial past is key for constructing and accepting reproductive rumours. Feldman-Savelsberg, Ndonko and Yang (p. 142) define reproductive uncertainty as "anxiety towards disruption (or even termination) of fertility" (infertility, infant mortality, miscarriages) as well as a fear from disrupting social and cultural reproduction. Strong distrust and suspicion towards intentions by the government and public health initiatives in the 1980s were linked to rumours about "the occult in government circles" as well as the belief in supernatural attacks on female fertility (p. 143). In the early 1990s, distrust grew with the promotion of universal vaccination and immunization implemented by foreign health workers (WHO). The tetanus vaccination campaign, legalization of contraception and promotion of family planning generated rumours on sterilizing vaccines, in which the local press played a significant role (p. 145). The reintroduction of the universal vaccination campaign evoked "negative collective memories of ("the authoritarian character") of medical efforts by the French colonial government" which carried out forced vaccinations in an attempt to control certain diseases (e.g., the 1940s anti-gonorrhoea campaign) (p. 145). "Historically based mistrust woven into past and present policies" was evident in rumours on sterilizing vaccines and resistance to vaccination and "bad vaccines" became a means for 1) girls in Cameroon to protect their reproductive potential; 2) the local community to protect the autonomy from the government and international agencies (p. 146). Distrust of foreigners/white people, memories of the colonial past and the international assistance to the healthcare system in Cameroon is a constant theme of mistrust in vaccination (p. 148). See Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg, Flavien T. Ndonko and Song Yang, "How Rumor Begets Rumor: Collective Memory, Ethnic Conflict, and Reproductive Rumors in Cameroon", in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, London, pp. 141-158.

75 J. Scott Brennen, Felix M. Simon, Philip N. Howard and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism University of Oxford, Oxford, 2020, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-04/Brennen%20-%20COVID%2019%20Misinformation%20FINAL%20%283%29.pdf Accessed: 22 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 11.

Table 1: "Inductive typology of claims made within pieces of COVID-19-related misinformation" (Brennen et al. 2020, p. 11)

Type	**Description**
Public authority action/policy	Claims about state policy/action/ communication, claims about WHO guidelines and recommendations, etc.
Community spread	Claims about: - the international/national/local spread of the virus - people/groups/individuals involved/ infected
General medical advice and virus characteristics	Health remedies, self-diagnostics, effects and signs of the disease, etc.
Prominent actors	Claims about: - pharmacy companies or drugs manufacturers, - companies supplying the health care sector or other supplying companies, - famous people, celebrities that were infected, - the statements and actions of politicians (but not if the misinformation is coming from politicians or other famous people).
Conspiracies	Claims about: - the virus being a biological weapon, - the person supposedly behind the pandemic - the pandemic being predicted
Virus transmission	Claims about: - how the virus is transmitted and how to stop the transmission, including protection measures (e.g., cleaning, protective gear etc.)

Explanation of virus origins	Claims about: - where and how the virus originated (e.g., in animals), - properties of the virus
Public preparedness	(Normative) claims about: - hoarding, buying supplies, social distancing, (non-)adherence to measures, etc.
Vaccine development and availability	Claims about: - the vaccine, its development and availability

The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus intensified processes already observed in previous decades. In a text published in 2005, Jean-Bruno Renard[76] wrote on rumours ("unverified news") and made the distinction between "assertive rumours" that "support the reality of invented facts" and "negatory rumours" which "negate the reality of recognized facts".[77] He then presented the "typical characteristics of negatory rumours":[78] 1) "hypercritical thought" (real events are seen as rumours); 2) "revealing another reality", that is, the denied reality is supplanted by a new reality (e.g. the Earth is not round, the Earth is flat)[79]; 3) revealing the conspiracy and believing in another reality hidden from the entire world, which includes a specific secret plan of an organized "evil" group that holds power over the media (e.g. the CIA, the Masons, the Jews), which is why conspiracists "frequently use the expression 'official truth'", which to them is a synonym for a lie, opposed to the truth they are uncovering.[80] Renard concludes that negatory rumours as well as conspiracy ideas will gain increased visibility and space on the information market in the future, due to the following:

1. acceptance of "cognitive relativism" (analysed by Boudon) and the idea that knowledge is "neither objective nor definitive", which encourages support for "alternatives to generally accepted knowledge";[81]

76 Jean-Bruno Renard, "Negatory Rumors: From the Denial of Reality to Conspiracy Theory", in: Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, London, pp. 223-240. Quoted line on p. 223.

77 J.-B. Renard, "Negatory Rumors: From the Denial of Reality to Conspiracy Theory", p. 223.

78 Ibid, p. 224.

79 Ibid., p. 229.

80 Ibid., p. 225.

81 Ibid., p. 235.

2. exposure of government scandals and news coverage on suspicious facts, which increases public distrust of official media and news;[82]
3. increased number of groups in which negatory rumours are created and shared (e.g., more than 50% Americans believe in at least one conspiracy[83]);
4. complete immersion in "a world where reality and its simulacrum, truth and lies, become increasingly confusing", a world that combines "real and synthetic imaginaries"[84], and the line between fiction and truth, true information and fake news, or between public and private and between man and machine, become more fluid and porous.[85]

Celebrities and fake news in the new communication environment

The new communication environment and the role and significance of fake news may be analysed through the phenomenon of celebrities. This is in line with the statement by Fred Inglis in his book *A Short History of Celebrity*, that celebrities are "a product of culture and technology".[86] Rojek's influential study *Celebrity* (2001)[87] also shows that "mass media representation (...) is the key principle in the formation of celebrity culture", and celebrities as a socio-cultural phenomenon represent famous individuals, extremely popular in the field of their work (such as film, music, sports, politics, modelling etc.).[88] The celebrity embodies and represents a complex combination of "intensive familiarity", "recognizability", "holiness", "distance" and "remoteness".[89] Redmond sees fame as an "ambivalent and dominant cultural phenomenon, a meta-discourse" which in various ways shapes the "social and everyday life of many"[90], with fame culture offering a specific experience of intimacy. In recent decades, celebrities have appeared as a specific "type of social authority for different social groups", and "their words, actions and messages are effective".[91] Precisely because of their familiarity, reputation, authority and influence on others, celebrities have a "significant role (positive, negative, ambivalent) in different crises".[92] Of course, this type of engagement has also

82 Ibid., p. 235.

83 Christina Georgacopoulos, "Why We Fall for Conspiracies", *Fight Fake News*, February 2020, https://faculty.lsu.edu/fakenews/about/rumors.php Accessed: 23 August 2021.

84 J.-B. Renard, "Negatory Rumors: From the Denial of Reality to Conspiracy Theory", p. 235.

85 Ibid., p. 236.

86 Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010, p. 10.

87 Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, Reaktion Books, London 2001, p. 13.

88 Olivier Driessens, "Celebrity capital: redefining celebrity using field theory", *Theory and Society* 42(5/2013), pp. 543-560, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-013-9202-3 Accessed: 21 August 2021.

89 F. Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*, p. 11.

90 Sean Redmond, "Intimate Fame Everywhere", in Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (eds.) *Framing Celebrity: New directions in celebrity culture*, Routledge, Oxon, New York 2010, pp. 27-43. Quoted line on p. 27.

91 Javad Yoosefi Lebni, Seyed Fahim Irandoost, Nafiul Mehedi, Sardar Sedighi and Arash Ziapour, "The role of celebrities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran: opportunity or threat?", *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 2020, pp. 1-3, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347847734_The_Role_of_Celebrities_during_the_COVID-19_Pandemic_in_Iran_Opportunity_or_Threat Accessed: 17 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 1.

92 J. Y. Lebni et al., "The role of celebrities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran: opportunity or threat?", p. 1.

been analysed from a critical perspective in research literature, noting the problems and short-term effects inherent in this type of engagement.[93]

Kamiński, Szymańska and Nowak researched whose tweets about COVID-19 attracted the most attention[94], and discovered that "celebrities and politicians posted positive messages", while "scientific and health authorities often employed a negative vocabulary" – "the posts with positive sentiment gained more likes and relative likes than nonpositive ones".[95] Based on this data, Kamiński, Szymańska and Nowak conclude that "during the pandemic, the tweets of celebrities and politicians related to COVID-19 outperform those coming from health and scientific institutions".[96]

Commenting on the "obsession with fame" in the pandemic context for *The Guardian*, Rojek notes that in the modern world, "celebrities are rated more than politicians" because people consider them to be more "real".[97] Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) have enabled a greater degree of intimacy with celebrities than ever before, who every day share "stories about their lives" with a numerous audience, thus creating profitable relationships.[98]

Analysing the problem of celebrities in the context of fake news (and conspiracy theories), what becomes evident is their contradictory, flexible and dynamic position – on the one hand, a celebrity can be a subject around whom fake news and rumours are (re)constructed, while on the other the celebrity may figure as a "superspreader" of fake news and misinformation. A case in point is Madonna, the globally celebrated musician, whose career has from the beginning been marked by a series of controversies, contradictory messages and polarized reactions.[99] [100] The journalist Rachel Kiley[101] writes about interpretations by online commenters who quoted familiar motifs and narratives of globally popular conspiracy theories to claim that Madonna "predicted" the pandemic scenario during her performance at Eurosong 2019 in Tel Aviv. This is explained by the fact that her dancers wore masks, while the crown she wore was reminiscent of the coronavirus symbol. The

93 See Dan Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment. Fame, Wealth and Power in Conservation*, Zed Books, London, New York, 2009.

94 Mikołaj Kamiński, Cyntia Szymańska and Jan Krzysztof Nowak, "Whose Tweets on COVID-19 Gain the Most Attention: Celebrities, Political, or Scientific Authorities?", Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking, 24(2/2021), pp. 123-128, https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/cyber.2020.0336 Accessed: 27 September 2021.

95 M. Kamiński, C. Szymańska and J. K. Nowak, "Whose Tweets on COVID-19 Gain the Most Attention: Celebrities, Political, or Scientific Authorities?", p. 123.

96 Ibid., p. 123.

97 Louis Wise, "'There's a sense that celebrities are irrelevant': has coronavirus shattered our fame obsession?", *The Guardian*, 2 May 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/may/02/theres-a-sense-that-celebrities-are-irrelevant-has-coronavirus-shattered-our-fame-obsession Accessed: 4 September 2021.

98 L. Wise, "'There's a sense that celebrities are irrelevant': has coronavirus shattered our fame obsession?".

99 Marguerite Van den Berg and Claartje L. ter Hoeven, "Madonna as a Symbol of Reflexive Modernisation", *Celebrity Studies*, 4(2/2013), pp. 144-154.

100 Marija Geiger Zeman, Zdenko Zeman and Mirela Holy, "Između otpora i konformizma: starenje kao nova Madonnina 'revolucija'" (Between resistance and conformism: Old age as Madonna's new 'revolution'), Sic : časopis za književnost, kulturu i književno prevođenje, 10(1/2019), pp. 1-26, https://hrcak.srce.hr/232287 Accessed: 20 August 2021.

101 Rachel Kiley, "People think Madonna predicted coronavirus with 2019 performance", *daily Dot*, 22 March 2020, https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/madonna-eurovision-coronavirus-prediction/ Accessed: 27 August 2021.

performance itself was proclaimed to be a satanic ritual with Madonna being accused of witchcraft (e.g., "Madonna is a high-level illuminati member. She performs a satanic ritual [...] She already knew about the coronavirus in 2019. Don't you see it is obvious this virus pandemic is known to these people at that time because it is artificial not natural" etc.). In July 2020 she sparked controversy with an Instagram post perpetuating fake news and conspiracy ideas that the cure for coronavirus already exists (in the form of hydroxychloroquine), but the elites are hiding it in order to control people through fear.[102] She also promoted Stella Immanuel, a doctor and Christian pastor, one of the main promoters of hydroxychloroquine,[103] a drug whose efficacy in treating COVID-19 has not been proven.[104]

Although Madonna's video was erased by Instagram administrators after being online for one hour and thirty minutes, with the explanation that fact-checkers identified the video as false information, the Instagram post became news in mainstream media. A year earlier, Madonna was accused of being a member of an elite group that had all the information on the emergence of a global pandemic, while owing to an Instagram post about a drug kept secret by the elites as they implement population control, she was then labelled in the public arena as a spreader of fake news. Her post also drew criticism from some of her followers (especially after she reposted it), accusing her of "spreading lies and quackery" ("MADONNA!!! Again?! This is wrong! You have influence and a voice and you're spreading falsehood and quackery. Inform yourself! Or, as you say, WAKE UP!!!").[105] This wasn't the only controversial post by Madonna during the pandemic period. In March 2020 CNN shared the news (also originating from Madonna's Instagram profile) in which the star said: "That's the thing about Covid-19 (...) It doesn't care about how rich you are, how famous you are, how funny you are, how smart you are, where you live, how old you are, what amazing stories you can tell (...) It's the great equalizer and what's terrible about it is what's great about it."[106] This statement also caused negative comments by her followers who stressed the importance of class and social differences which became even more pronounced in the context of the pandemic: "Sorry my queen, love u so much, but we're not equal. We can die from the same diseases, but the poor will suffer the most. Do not romanticise nothing of this tragedy."[107] Rojek notes that false familiarity and para-intimacy were brought into question during lockdown when celebrities (like Madonna) created and

102 Nick Bond "Covid-19: Madonna posts wild Coronavirus conspiracy theory, Instagram hides it", *NZ Herald*, 29 July 2020, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/covid-19-madonna-posts-wild-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-instagram-hides-it/6VYFHEZE6GWX3IZ5BPU2UPE7AY/ Accessed: 17 August 2020.

103 Dickens Olewe, "Stella Immanuel - the doctor behind unproven coronavirus cure claim", *BBC News*, 29 July 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53579773 Accessed: 28 December 2021.

104 *Infektološki glasnik*, "Hidroksiklorokin u liječenju COVID-19 – što je novo?" (*Hydroxychloroquine in treating COVID-19 – recent updates*) , https://cji.com.hr/hidroksiklorokin-u-lijecenju-covid-19-sto-je-novo/ Accessed: 28 December 2021.

105 N. Bond "Covid-19: Madonna posts wild Coronavirus conspiracy theory, Instagram hides it".

106 Toyin Owoseje, "Coronavirus is 'the great equalizer,' Madonna tells fans from her bathtub", *CNN Entertainment*, 23 March 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/23/entertainment/madonna-coronavirus-video-intl-scli/index.html Accessed: 28 December 2021.

107 T. Owoseje, "Coronavirus is 'the great equalizer,' Madonna tells fans from her bathtub".

sent messages about the pandemic while they resided at luxurious estates and glamorous places, which emphasized the fact they were "untouchable" and privileged, as well as the insurmountable differences of status and class.[108]

Li and Scott analyse the spread of fake news using the example of footballer Wu Lei to show how a celebrity "becomes a subject" of misinformation disseminated in the media.[109] On 20 March 2020 the Spanish La Liga club RCD Espanyol confirmed that six players tested positive for COVID-19, Wu Lei among them. This soon became big news on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. Four days later, on 24 March 2020, the Chinese digital news application Red Star News shared the news that Wu had recovered from COVID-19 and his test result was now negative. Wu's team soon spoke up and denied a series of news in the Spanish media on Wu Lei's diagnosis, state, recovery etc. After two days the confusion increased after Wu Lei stated he had not recovered and could not be tested again due to a shortage of tests.[110] This is just one of the many examples of how Chinese (but also other global and national) media and social networks generate a great number of stories, news and rumours based on un/reliable sources.

Although celebrities have a significant role in spreading fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories, there has not been much research on the "influence of celebrities on the behaviour of ordinary people during the COVID-19 crisis.[111] In addition to Madonna who keeps confusing the public and attracting attention through the already identified mechanism of combining contradictory messages, some celebrities disseminate posts with fake news and misinformation, which are then shared by mainstream media as news, while other celebrities, in cooperation with famous organizations or of their own accord, share official information approved by public health authorities and support official government/public health campaigns related to COVID-19. Research by Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe has shown that celebrities are "super-spreaders" of conspiracy theories and fake news because they have the power to make certain information go viral very quickly.[112]

Methodology

The focus of this qualitative discourse analysis are texts published on two web portals active in Croatia (*24 sata.hr*, *index.hr*), about celebrities that publicly shared (mainly on social media) controversial posts about COVID-19 or reacted to the spread of false information on the pandemic and appealed for responsibility. This 1) points to the power and visibility of celebrities and 2)

108 L. Wise, "'There's a sense that celebrities are irrelevant': has coronavirus shattered our fame obsession?".

109 B. Li and O. Scott, "Fake News Travels Fast: Exploring Misinformation Circulated Around Wu Lei's Coronavirus Case", p. 506.

110 Ibid., p. 506.

111 J. Y. Lebni et al., "The role of celebrities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran: opportunity or threat?", p. 1.

112 Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington and Edward Hurcombe, "'Corona? 5G? or both? ': the dynamics of COVID-19/5G conspiracy theories on Facebook", *Media International Australia*, 177(1/2020), pp. 12–29, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X20946113 Accessed: 18 August 2021.

illustrates the circulation of information and misinformation in the context of the new hybrid media and communication system.

Topić and Gilmer note that qualitative discourse analysis is the "type of analysis that can expose media bias and basic assumptions in media texts", and highlight Smith's conclusion that "knowledge of contemporary society is to a large extent mediated (...) through text".[113] Chigona et al. emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary understanding of media discourse as it "contributes to shaping social reality".[114] That is, "the media does not only influence the content and what their readers are reading", but also the readers' perception, opinions, ideologies etc.[115]

The following analysis is based on texts published on portals in Croatia, *24 sata.hr* and *index.hr*. Texts published in the period between 1 February 2020 and 24 June 2021 were searched for these key words:

A) First round of research:

√ famous, conspiracy theories, coronavirus

√ famous, conspiracy theories, Covid-19

√ celebrities, conspiracy theories, coronavirus

√ celebrities, conspiracy theories, Covid-19

√ famous, misinformation, coronavirus

√ famous, misinformation, Covid-19

√ celebrities, misinformation, coronavirus

√ celebrities, misinformation, Covid-19

√ famous, fake news, coronavirus

√ famous, fake news, Covid-19

√ celebrities, fake news, coronavirus

√ celebrities, fake news, Covid-19

113 Martina Topić and Etajha C. Gilmer, "Hillary Clinton and the Media: From Expected Roles to the Critique of Feminism", *The Qualitative Report* 22(10/2017), pp. 2533-2543. Smith's statement cited from Sisco and Lucas. Quoted line on p. 2537.

114 Wallace Chigona, Phakamani Mavela, Robin Moyanga, Sarah Mulaji, Shaloam Mutetwa and Hakunavanhu Ndoro, "Critical Discourse Analysis on Media Coverage of COVID-19 Contract Tracing Applications: Case of South Africa", *C&T '21: C&T '21: Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Communities & Technologies - Wicked Problems in the Age of Tech*, pp. 15-24, https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3461564.3461580 Accessed: 23 August 2021. Quoted line on p. 15.

115 W. Chigona et al., p. 15.

B) Second round of research:

√ fake news, coronavirus

√ fake news, coronavirus

√ COVID-19, misinformation

√ Coronavirus, misinformation

√ COVID-19, conspiracy theories

√ COVID-19, conspiracy theories

√ Coronavirus, conspiracy theories

Based on these keywords used to search the archive of portals *index.hr* and *24 sata.hr*, a total of 33 articles were found – seven articles in the first search round (1 article on *index.hr* and 6 articles on *24 sata.hr*), while the second search round yielded 26 articles (7 articles on *24 sata,hr*; 19 articles on *index.hr*).

Celebrities discussed in news articles on conspiracy theories and fake news come from the field of sports, the music and film industry, politics, business and social networks (influencers on social networks/micro-influencers). Some texts were taken from multiple sources in foreign media and published on both portals, and some information was published multiple times.

The texts were copied into a Word document, and all authors of the paper participated in the reading, analysis, analysis comparison and discussion.

Critical discourse analysis was the method used in analysing the texts. This method is used when researchers aim to identify the main discourses repeated in the written text. The main discourses are in this sense, key arguments that can be inferred from the text, i.e. the discursive topoi, and written language is seen as an agent of social change.[116] [117] [118] In terms of the main argument (*topos/topoi*) to be inferred from the text, Grue refers to Wodak and Meyer who state that *topical analysis* enables us to discover hidden meanings of an argument, through which *topoi* become part of the argumentation belonging to obligatory, explicit or implicit meaning.[119] Topos "justifies the line of argument but requires less justification" because it is rooted in "general views", while topoi relates less to words and more to concepts.[120]

Discourse analysis is appropriate for this paper because it also enables a text analysis within social circumstances, both locally and globally. This approach is also known as a discourse historical

116 Ruth Wodak and Paul Chilton, *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis: Theory, Methodology, and Interdisciplinary*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2005.

117 Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds.) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, London: SAGE, London 2001.

118 Jan Grue, "Critical discourse analysis, topoi and mystification: disability policy documents from a Norwegian NGO", *Discourse Studies,*11 (3/2009), pp. 285-308.

119 Ibid, p. 289.

120 Ibid, p. 289.

approach, which Reisigl and Wodak define as part of a critical discourse analysis in which the analysis is based on examining persons, processes and actions as well as characteristics and attributes given to social actors, objects and processes.[121] Moreover, this type of analysis is based on researching arguments used in every identified discourse. Finally, the analysis is based on researching the perspective from which the attributions and arguments that make up the discourse have come from.

This approach is also useful for researching media discourse, under analysis in this text, as it enables understanding media discourse in the wider social ecosystem and a clear identification of arguments and their meanings.

Research results

Analysis of newspaper articles identified two dominant discourses, **the conspiracy theory discourse and practices of resistance** on the one hand, and a **positive discourse confirming and approving trust in science and social responsibility** on the other. In each analysed article these two discourses were opposed or confirmed by sub-discourses: the negative discourse with the following sub-discourses: *conspiracy theories, resistance, danger, irresponsibility and sanctioning*, and the positive discourse by these sub-discourses: *science*, *responsibility*, *use of visibility for the common good*, *supporting prevention and active fight against conspiracy theories and pseudoscience*.

Conspiracy theories and practices of resistance

Conspiracy theories disseminated publicly by celebrities relate to a range of scientifically unfounded and contradictory beliefs, ranging from negating and expressing doubts about the existence of the pandemic to playing down the dangers of COVID-19, and statements that: 1) coronavirus is related to the 5G network, which has a negative impact on human health (e.g. "Covid-19 is caused by 5G network radiation", "5G network increases coronavirus symptoms", symptoms of 5G exposure are "the same as the symptoms of the coronavirus", "5G was launched in China in November 2019", and "what we are witnessing now is the effect of radiation", 5G is "very, very harmful for human health"); 2) the pandemic or "plandemic" is an artificially created crisis manipulated by powerful people ("rulers of the world" or a "shadow government" – the general public does not know who they are because they rank higher than Rothschild and Rockefeller) with the aim of controlling the global population through mandatory public healthcare measures such as lockdowns or vaccinations (e.g. the coronavirus is just an overture to implementing the plan of those in power who wish to control people through the use of microchips).

121 Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)", p. 87-121, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251636976_The_Discourse-Historical_Approach_DHA Accessed: 21 December 2021. Quoted line on pp. 93-94.

Vaccination is labelled by some celebrities as microchipping with the aim of population control, implemented by powerful world players, with special emphasis given to the role and involvement of Bill Gates. Besides global control, some celebrities disseminated conspiracy ideas on the "real" political causes of pandemics – destabilizing USA and overthrowing the (now already former) US president Donald Trump, or the global geopolitical power of China.

In the context of advocating conspiracy theories, famous "conspiracy theorists" like David Icke are praised, and conspiracy theories on COVID-19 are linked to other world-famous conspiracy theories disseminated on social media (e.g. Bill Gates as a eugenicist, or Pizzagate).

All posts have a generally critical view of the system, politicians, elites, the pharmaceutical industry, *truth-checkers*, and the mainstream which, as celebrities claim, silence, manipulate and censor opposing views (e.g., the media pays celebrities to lie that they have covid). As a resistance tactic, celebrities send public appeals for signing petitions against implementing the 5G network, for rejecting preventive measures (wearing masks, quarantine, vaccination, PCR tests) and guidelines prescribed by governments and public health authorities.

In addition to expressing a negative attitude towards people who accept information disseminated through the mainstream media (with the often use of the label "sheep"), the focus is on "thinking for yourself" regardless of not being in line with the content and attitudes of mainstream messages. The focus in general is on individual, not group responsibility.

Contrary to scientific recommendations of prevention, alternative medicine is promoted, as well as practices/beliefs developed in alternative/New Age spirituality (e.g., being in a good mood, blessings, meditation, prayer as the best prevention against the virus), consuming "magic medicine" (such as lemon, baking soda, tepid water) or scientifically disproved medicine like hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin. It should be noted that some celebrities express selective trust in science and scientists, that is, scientists whose opinion on COVID-19 is not in line with views of the scientific establishment are supported (e.g., Didier Raoult – "the virus can be treated with hydroxychloroquine and the antibiotic azithromycin, also known as Sumamed. Why did they give up on this? Because hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin are very cheap").

Texts on the analysed portals identify the Internet and social media as spaces for creating and disseminating conspiracy theories, with celebrities most often using Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook for these types of messages. Each article sharing the news on the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories related to the current pandemic, has a specific structure pointing to a correlation between negative and positive discourse: after stating something considered to be a misinformation, completely opposite to epidemiological measures, it is presented critically and denied by quoting scientific authorities (the views of prominent scientists, scientific studies [Oxford University] or sharing official statistics (Our World in data, Eurostat, Croatian Bureau of Statistics). Journalists of *index.hr* here use disqualifying expressions for: 1) conspiracy and negatory statements, such as: idiocy, stupidity, nonsense, bizarre, stupid, dangerous ignorance etc.; 2) their

promoters are labelled as uninformed and malevolent individuals; 3) consumers of misinformation are qualified as "ignorant people" who uncritically adopt unfounded ideas and statements.

Analysis shows that "dangerous" is the most commonly used attribute for disqualifying and warning against negative consequences of a particular conspiracy or antivaxxer idea (dangerous video, dangerous conspiracy theory, dangerous trend, dangerous lies, dangerous ignorance etc.). Texts published on the portal *index.hr* are characterized by comparing the scientific and non-scientific discourse, alongside constructing the distinction between "real" science and "bad" science i.e., pseudoscience and pseudoscientists, whose careers in science and scientific works are analysed and subjected to devaluating critique.

Celebrities who take the position of "non-licensed experts" in this pandemic context are also criticised, with emphasis given to their significant influence due to their popularity, visibility and scope of influence. Since they have millions of followers on social networks, celebrities have a "huge reach" so their public responsibility is highlighted in particular if they choose to create or spread misinformation. In order to emphasize the important role that celebrities have in disseminating misinformation and rumours, one research by Oxford University is emphasized, which shows that "celebrities are responsible for approximately one fifth of all misinformation on the coronavirus", while research by Cornell University points to Donald Trump as the greatest instigator of lies on the coronavirus.[122]

For celebrities, sharing theories and misinformation is in most cases related to negative consequences and non-formal and/or formal sanctions that have a more or less significant impact on their public image and career. For example, it has been emphasized that a celebrity promoting conspiracy theories provokes controversy for the general public and even for some followers of this celebrity, with a flood/avalanche of comments, vehement condemnation by the media, criticism, negative media representation and closing down of user accounts. YouTube closed down David Icke's account, Facebook removed a video on the coronavirus posted by Donald Trump in which he claims that children are "practically immune to Covid-19", with the explanation that "it violates company rules against the spread of misinformation on the coronavirus" and Instagram censored Madonna for spreading false information on the alleged medicine for the coronavirus etc. Due to negative reactions and bad publicity, some celebrities erased tweets they had shared on the coronavirus, following a direct order by their publishing house or label, while others had their professional collaborations cancelled and contracts terminated. For example, the publishing house Fraktura publicly cancelled their partnership with the blogger Alison Marić because of her Facebook posts on the coronavirus and refusal to wear a mask in a public space, while the famous Australian chef Pete Evans was kicked out of the new season of a popular culinary show.

122 A. G., "Slavne osobe dijele teoriju zavjere o povezanosti 5G mreže i korone: 'Svi ste ovce'" (*Celebrities share conspiracy theory on the connection between the 5G network and the coronavirus: 'You are all sheep'"*), *index.hr*, 16 April 2020., https://www.index.hr/magazin/clanak/slavne-osobe-dijele-teoriju-zavjere-o-povezanosti-5g-mreze-i-korone-svi-ste-ovce/2175634.aspx Accessed: 3 June 2021.

Trust in science and the responsibility of celebrities

Diametrically opposed to the conspiracy theory discourse and irresponsibility of celebrities, is the positive discourse of affirming trust in science and social responsibility. This discourse primarily functions through denying the negative discourse and pointing to its falseness and destructive consequences of its spread:

"Although numerous scientists have confirmed that the 5G network is completely unrelated to the spread of the coronavirus, conspiracy theorists beg to differ."[123]

"Exactly how Hawkins discovered mood vibrations and the virus mentioned by Marić, cannot be inferred from the texts published on the Veritas Publishing webpage. It should be noted that nowhere in scientific literature can it be found that people vibrate, nor is it explained what this should mean in the context of health and health policy. One thing is certain, Hawkins couldn't have written anything on the vibration of the SARS-CoV-2 virus because he died in 2012. It should also be noted that during his life he never published a scientific work in which he explained the mechanism of destroying the virus through vibrations, or the moods apparently created through them."[124]

The context of positive discourse affirms individuals disqualified in the conspiracy theory context, such as Bill Gates who is presented as one of the "leading world humanitarians", or Tom Hanks, who, after posting on the importance of wearing masks and following prevention measures, was accused of paedophilia by members of the anonymous online audience, owing to his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein.

The authority of science and scientists as key actors in the efficient prevention of the spread of the coronavirus is also built up, despite current limitations of science due to incomplete knowledge and partial evidence on the mechanisms of how the virus spreads. This is why we are in a state of an "infodemic", which carries with it a sense of coercion – we are forced to "swim in a sea of misinformation". The pandemic is labelled as a "serious healthcare matter" which is why scientific expertise and recommendations are emphasized – only experts can have real knowledge on the current pandemic, and "all we can do is follow the advice of experts who claim there is no cure".

As it has already been said, ideas coming from the conspiracy theory catalogue, the misinformation and the fake news, are critically examined and deconstructed by questioning their sources, quoting scientific research and established scientific authorities, pointing to mistakes in building the argument and wrong interpretations of scientific facts, insisting on a scientific way of thinking (for individuals who are not scientists by profession), with a clear distinction being made between "real" scientists and "bad"/"problematic" scientists (especially regarding vaccination). In this context,

123 Ibid.

124 Nenad Jarić Dauenahuer, "Hrvatska blogerica širi opasne laži o koroni. Prati je pola milijuna ljudi" (*Croatian blogger spreads dangerous lies on the coronavirus. She has half a million followers*), *index.hr*, 5 December 2020, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/hrvatska-blogerica-siri-opasne-lazi-o-koroni-prati-je-pola-milijuna-ljudi/2236290.aspx Accessed: 3 June 2021.

texts published on *index.hr* transfer scientific discourse into the public and news item domain and there is an insistence on the scientific way of thinking for everyone – including people who do not work in science):

"We insisted this wasn't a scientific way of thinking because benefits from wearing a mask cannot be based on the type of evidence known in science as anecdotal, practically with no real value. The fact that a grandma of your acquaintance lived to be a hundred even though she smoked, does not mean that smoking is healthy!"[125]

The responsibility sub-discourse focuses on social responsibility of celebrities, which comes primarily from their visibility and general familiarity. In the context of insisting on following epidemiological measures, ranging from wearing masks to the insistence on having faith in the vaccine, positive examples include celebrities who use the public arena to appeal for following epidemiological measures, those who follow preventive measures, publicly share narratives on personal experience with the disease and actively participate in the fight against misinformation. Angelina Jolie for instance produced a programme on the coronavirus for teenagers in collaboration with the BBC, shared through the BBC YouTube channel, with advice on recognizing misinformation, on online schooling and youth experience during the pandemic crisis.

Alongside emphasizing positive examples of celebrities who actively take part in the fight against conspiracy theories and misinformation, and affirm officially prescribed prevention measures, alternative medicine is explicitly criticised, its consumerist, commodifying and profit-oriented aspects as well as the wellness industry. More precisely, unverified tests and ads for preparations such as essential oil, colloid silver, vitamins marketed as cures for the coronavirus or immunity boosters are all criticized. While supporters of the negative discourse accuse large pharmaceutical companies promoted by the media for "profiting from diseases", supporters of the positive discourse accuse companies in the wellness industry for profiting from "fear and panic", noting that the pandemic has opened up a new market niche "for all kinds of scammers".

In conclusion

Due to their visibility and familiarity, celebrities as a socio-cultural phenomenon figure as social authorities with an enormous influence on different audiences and therefore have a significant role during the COVID-19 crisis. They take different positions in this "new hybrid ecosystem" (Wheeler), either promoting the discourse of conspiracy theories and fake news or supporting the mainstream discourse based on science and social responsibility. The new hybrid ecosystem functions as a network in which different actors participate, and information disseminated in the virtual media world may have, and often do have, real consequences, for the disseminators as well as the consumers of different information.

125 Ibid.

Findings of this research reveal that the media try to appear as fighters for true information and science, especially visible in the labels given to those who deny scientific research and opinions by scientists. This shows that traditional media react to fake news posted on social networks i.e., it seems that the new hybrid ecosystem functions in such a way that traditional and mainstream media are engaged in refuting fake news on social media. Not only is the public engaged in consuming news through social and traditional/mainstream media, but traditional media are also powerfully engaged, as noted by Wheeler, but they also add a clear estimation of the situation and try to refute false information.[126] However, equally important is the fact that this research can also support the thesis that traditional media in a way help disseminate false information because they report on the posts and tweets of celebrities, who often share or encourage the use of false information.[127]

Note on the text:

This paper is based on a lecture presented under the same title at the international interdisciplinary symposium *Filozofijska misao u vremenu fake newsa, govora mržnje, infodemije, manipuliranja i neslobode medija* (Philosophical thought in the era of fake news, hate speech, infodemic, manipulation and lack of freedom for the media) (2021), and has been developed as part of a project implemented by the Ivo Pilar Social Sciences Institute in Zagreb, "Tijelo, zdravlje, prevencija: Medijski konstruirani diskursi i življene kulture u doba novih 'bio-realiteta'" (*Body, health, prevention: Media-constructed discourses and living cultures in times of new 'bio-realities'*).

126 M. Wheeler, "Celebrity politics in the fake news age"

127 Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington and Edward Hurcombe, "'Corona? 5G? or both?': the dynamics of COVID-19/5G conspiracy theories on Facebook", *Media International Australia*, 177(1/2020), p. 12–29, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X20946113 Accessed: 18 August 2021.

Izazovi "novog hibridnog ekosistema": slavne osobe, lažne vijesti i Covid-19

Sažetak

Kompleksna isprepletenost mainstream medija i društvenih medija rezultirala je stvaranjem "novog hibridnog ekosistema" u kojem se konzumenti/ce primarno angažiraju oko ideja i vijesti objavljenih na društvenim mrežama koje naknadno mainstream mediji prenose kao vijesti (Wheeler 2018). U tom novom "hiper-povezanom okolišu" (Pepper 2018) "lažne vijesti" zauzimaju specifično mjesto. Koncept "lažnih vijesti" je vrlo kompleksan, kontradiktoran i ambivalentan jer figurira kao krovni pojam kojim se pokrivaju različiti fenomeni i raznolike prakse od kojih su neke ranije poznate dok su druge novijeg datuma (Molina i sur. 2021). Novi komunikacijski okoliš i ulogu lažnih vijesti u njemu moguće je analizirati i kroz optiku fenomena slavnih osoba. Rad metodom analize diskursa raščlanjuje tekstove o različitim izjavama slavnih osoba o Covid-19 na dva hrvatska web portala (index.hr, 24sata.hr). Pokazuje se da zbog težine koju njihovom djelovanju i izjavama pridaju konzumenti sadržaja web portala, slavne osobe funkcioniraju kao vrlo potentni prenositelji lažnih vijesti. S druge strane, mainstream mediji često djeluju kao korektiv društvenih medija, nastojeći što uvjerljivije demantirati lažne vijesti i njihove slavne prenositelje na društvenim mrežama.

Ključne riječi: *novi hibridni ekosistem, lažne vijesti, slavne osobe, Covid-19, analiza diskursa, index.hr, 24 sata.hr.*

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