Public opinion buildup in post-truth era – A case study

**Abstract**

In this paper I will explore the issue of knowledge buildup during periods of crisis, emphasizing on the transition from the traditional media to biased/partisan media. Building on the assumption that people’s beliefs and values are predictors for their behavior, I will further argue on the relevance of the way people gain knowledge, and how this process’ outcomes influences the buildup of public opinion, as public opinion is usually regarded as the most important guideline for public policies in a working democracy.

For the most part, I would like to discuss about the ramifications of mistreating the informational dimension of crises by allowing alternative narratives, conspiracy theories, propaganda, fake news etc. to play a bigger role than they should in public discourse. The argument here is that the public deliberation process tends to fail when there are many unreasonable parties that intend to guide public policy-making towards an outcome with counterfactual inputs.

As a case study, I will present how the Romanian society reacted to some crisis-like situations, taking into account how both mainstream and lesser media covered certain events. It is essential to understand the link between disinformation and people’s propensity to surround themselves with information that validates their belief systems – especially when the information is counterfactual.

Keywords: post-truth, biased media, public opinion, disinformation.

Arguably, the last few years have been filled by events that could be categorized as crises – firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic and secondly, the war that escalated in Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022.[[1]](#footnote-1) I would say that these events are the ones that truly captivated the world’s attention and brought back memories of times that we thought are long over – fighting both pandemics and war. As I mentioned, these types of events are not a novelty to humankind, but they are a *novelty* for what is basically the *peak* of the informational and technological era, and I would argue that people react differently to them in the present compared to decades ago, mostly because of how quickly information and news are spread through the multitude of communication channels, social media especially. The point I am going to make is that the buildup of public opinion is heavily dependent on what we would call the *biased media* and the solving of crises can be burdened by this in the, what many are calling, the *post-truth* era. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, and see how these things are linked together.

**The concept of *Sovereignty –* State of exception and crises**

The first step we need to take in the direction I suggested is to understand what we are actually referring to when talking about a situation of crisis. For political theory, a crisis refers mostly to what Schmitt would categorize as a *state of exception.* In the context of his work, *a state of exception includes any kind of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures.* (Schmitt, 1985, pp. 1-2)Meanwhile, when talking about an *exception, it presupposes a constitutional order that provides guidelines on how to confront crises in order to reestablish order and stability, a state of emergency need not have an existing order as reference point because* ***necessitas non habet legem*** *(necessity knows no law).* (Schmitt, 1985, pp. 1-2)It is safe to assume that both a pandemic and a medium to large-sized armed conflict[[2]](#footnote-2) can be included under the umbrella of the *states of exception.* Especially the first year of the pandemic was a challenge for all sovereign states – as there were many unknowns about the virus, from its transmission to its cure; some governments decided to take *exceptional* measures in order to reduce the virus’ rate of transmission and the potential (and actual) negative effects that it could’ve had on its peoples. These measures materialized most of the times into certain restrictions for the populations and the limitation and/or suspension of certain rights and liberties regarding free movement, privacy, and even work. Obviously, not everyone was happy with the governments’ decisions regarding the rights limitations and people were criticizing the so-considered harshly measures as being unnecessary and exaggerated for the scale of the situation – people tended to underestimate the spreading and severity of the illness caused by the, still, relatively new, Coronavirus. This unhappiness transformed into discontent, and people started to assemble in order to collectively criticize governmental decisions towards Covid-19 containment policies, with the outmost favorite way of doing such being the internet, social media in particular. In the next section, we will see how media and social media have enabled unreasonable opinions to evolve and how it nurtured a fake debate about the scientific consensus on the pandemic management, especially on the vaccination element.

**Post-truth and media biases**

One of the social phenomena that Lee McIntyre addresses in his book, *Post-Truth*, is the downfall of the traditional media and the transition to a partisan, opinion-based model. McIntyre builds a complex analysis that explores the many dimensions of the issues, from people’s cognitive biases and need for validation, to corporate interest and the material gains that media can get by steering towards the *scandalous*, rather than prioritizing genuine information and investigative journalism. The most basic principle is that in the past, our cognitive biases tended to be ameliorated through our interactions with other people, and McIntyre ironically puts out that in today’s *media deluge*, people are more isolated from opinions different of their own, unlike *our ancestors* who had to interact with each other in order to get information – within the act of communication with others, we are exposed to a wider range of views. In the present, though, we can be more selective with our social interactions – *if we don’t like someone’s comments, we can unfriend him or hide him on Facebook. If we want to gorge on conspiracy theories, there is probably a radio station for us. These days more than ever, we can surround ourselves with people who already agree with us.* (McIntyre, 2018)McIntyre and others also started to call out the bias-media, especially from the television networks, about transforming what used to be *news* *shows* into *opinions shows*, but it’s not only about *opinion*. In the context of the science deniers that figured out how to abuse the worries about media objectivity, they are getting the same – or sometimes even more – air time than the genuine news – *all they have to do is bully the media into believing that if “other research” exists on scientific topics, but they aren’t covering it, it must be because they are biased. Journalists took the bait and started to cover both sides of “controversial” issues like climate change and vaccines, even if the controversy had been generated only by those who had something financial or political at stake.* (McIntyre, 2018)This being said, this *equal time* policy created a *false equivalence* between the two sides of one story or issue *when there were not really two credible sides.* The main consequence for the average citizen is utter confusion over what became a campaign for disinformation.

Many social media platforms have transformed into news aggregators with people sharing all kind of stories. Also, because most of them are driven by some kind of *likes* or *thumbs up* system, you are more likely to see news and posts that you are already agreeing upon. This rise of social media as a source for news blurred even more the lines between news and opinion as people began to share posts from blogs, random websites, alleged news sites, as if they were all true. People just surrounded themselves with only the things they wanted to hear – the so called *news silos*. (McIntyre, 2018) The problem with *news silos* is that they feed polarization and fragmentation in media content. If people get their news exclusively from social media, they can tune out the sources that they don’t like just like they *unfriend* people who disagree with their political opinions. McIntyre underlines another irony here, the Internet allowing immediate access to reliable information to anyone that bothers to look for it, has become *nothing but an echo chamber* – dangerous thing as well, when there is no editorial control on what is presented as *news*. Usually, these news-like coverages fall under the category of *fake news* – which is not only news that is false, it is deliberately false and it has been created for a purpose. Most of the fake news is put out there in order to awaken the curiosity in people, so they would click on the title and be sent to certain websites – the so-called *clickbait,* as provocative titling has that effect on people. They really become dangerous when they are attacking scientific facts, with the potential ramification of becoming an ideology with catastrophic impact. (McIntyre, 2018)

Before going into the next section, I will make a short summary of what we call *post-truth.* The simplest of definitions characterize it as a form of *contention that feelings are more accurate than facts, for the purpose of the political subordination of reality.* (McIntyre, 2018) The Oxford Dictionaries define it as *relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that appeals to emotion and personal belief*.[[3]](#footnote-3)So basically, what we would categorize as *truth* or *facts* are now seconded by matters of *opinion*; noteworthy is also that the term is usually used with a normative significance – *an expression of concern by those who care about the concept of truth and feel that is under attack*. (McIntyre, 2018)

**The nurturing of a fake argument**

If we are to discuss the Covid-19 pandemic issue within the *post-truth* lens, it will be easier to understand after we look at the global warming and climate science example – here I am showing, myself, some cognitive bias, as I am interested in the subject but I truly think this example is relevant to the discussion because of its similarities. Basically, what happened regarding the global warming phenomenon was that a competitive narrative starting to surface in the media which was *disproving* all the evidence that had been collected to that moment about the influence of man’s activity on the planet’s climate. While there was an already academic/scientific consensus about the negative impact that human activities have on the planet’s climate, the new narrative that surfaced overnight was disregarding all the evidence gathered so far while being in the spotlight for most of the big media. The narrative was transformed into a piece of *biased media* that was presented as what it wasn’t: breaking news about the climate science when, in fact, was not even remotely close to what we traditionally call science. They story kept being in the center of biased media attention to create confusion and uncertainty towards climate science – the biased media channels received funds from the big oil exploitation companies to keep pushing the stories about what was actually a fake scientific debate so they can get their way and get bigger profits for as long as they can.

Something really similar happened regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, especially with the vaccination part of it. Anti-vaxxers were already hanging around political scenes, arguing against them and citing the same counterfeit studies that postulated the autism-inducing properties of vaccines that were around for decades, when, in fact, they are constantly being improved and tested by scientists. You can only imagine the outrage of these people when still experimental vaccines were made available for the population. There was a strong partisanship against the vaccines that spread towards the *neutral* people – it managed to stir up different emotions, feelings and uncertainties that led to second guessing the benefits of vaccination and therefore, more people postponed or completely avoided getting vaccinated. In this situation, most of traditional media was supporting the emerging of medical science consensus about the benefits of vaccination but on the other hand, the internet was swarming with different narratives, conspiracy theories and propaganda about how harmful the vaccine *really* is. The most memorable one that circled the Romanian media and public space was the one issued by a now ex-politician, which stated that *the vaccine makes people sterile for three generations.[[4]](#footnote-4)* This statement perfectly represents the randomness of these narratives, their internal inconsistencies (how it would be possible that your family reach a 3rd generation if you are rendered sterile though vaccination) and the type of *arguments* one would present to support their opinion. The sad part was that even far-fetched and irrational narratives like the one I mentioned had reach towards the lesser minded and educated people, nurturing the seeds of doubt and partisanship regarding the vaccines. Some other popular narratives revolved around conspiracy theories regarding *big pharma*, chip implanting via the vaccines, 5G technology, genocides – basically, conspiracy theorists had the convenience of associating everything that was relatively new and unknown to the vast majority of people, or that was considered harmful at the time with the newly found vaccines. There were also some reasonable stands on the matter – usually from people who didn’t pushed their beliefs on others – of people that had different chronic diseases or were concerned about the lack of testing/the long term effects, but these were not really appreciated by media or social media because they lack the *sensational* element. Naturally, society began dividing on the matter with two sides being created. The main criterion was if you were or not vaccinated, with people usually showing some form of symbolical hostility towards another. The issue continued to gain more political significance as the cases skyrocketed and the hospitals and medical centers couldn’t keep up with the large amount of severely ill people, some of which unfortunately passed away. The high number of people requiring treatment for Covid forced the officials into transforming a large number of hospitals into ones destined at treating solely Covid patients – this meant that a lot of people who suffer from chronic diseases or were in need of surgical intervention couldn’t benefit from treatment.

The picture I tried to paint is based on the following causal relations: one of the main reasons for the sanitary crisis Romania had in the last year or two could’ve been avoided, or at least ameliorated if more people got vaccinated – especially from the more vulnerable categories – as the vaccines had been proven to help at developing less severe forms of illness. (World Health Organisation, 2022) Even at the time I am writing this paper (June, 2022), the latest statistics show that only 41.8% of Romania’s population has completed its vaccination scheme, which is not the most desirable situation. (CNCAV, INSP-CNSCBT, RENV, 2022) I already covered in another paper the motives of which Romanians tend to disregard modern medicine and hence, vaccination- to put it shortly, the social representations regarding the pandemic and vaccination were modeled almost exclusively by traditional and conservative views – there weren’t really any pro-vaccines narratives promoted in media and public space, while the conspiracy theories and *anti-vaxxeresque* attitudes were customary to every day interactions and exposure towards social media. It was only natural that the opinion of people that were already reluctant to modern medicine to get validated by the *echo chamber* that social media became, reinforcing people’s believes towards the *harmful* properties of the vaccines. (Cazan, 2022) From here we can draw the conclusion that the exposure to post-truth like *news* can produce a lot of damage – in the case presented above, contributing to a full scale crisis of the medical system. There is, of course, the argument of a weak health system with low potential to treat many sick people at the same time and that can be easily be sent into a state of crisis, but my point is made even stronger: if we knew we had a weak system that couldn’t handle the situation when *X* number of people fell ill, then more preventing measure should have been taken (such as a greater campaign for promoting the vaccination against Covid-19).

**The war in Ukraine and how the pandemic disappeared from the media’s radar**

As the pandemic got gradually less media coverage – as it started to lose its *sensational* factor and be less profitable for the news channels to run all the time – a new event shook the world and startled the media. Most people never thought of the possibility of another armed conflict in Europe after last’s century’s experience, but here we are. Even though there are other ongoing armed conflicts around the world, they don’t share the same attention and media coverage as the recently developed one in Ukraine. Arguably, the stakes and symbolic value are a lot higher for this war, in comparison with the conflicts in the failed states of Africa. The morning of the 24th of February brought the western world a lot of unrest and fear regarding everyone’s future. All the media’s attention was focused on the events in Ukraine, most news channels would cover it 24 hours a day, reporting the smallest of evolutions – as soon as they had new information or reports, they would broadcast it immediately. The war became less about *Ukraine vs Russia* and more about *The Western World vs Russia.* Even though Ukraine is not a part of any of the more *active* international organizations (like NATO, or the EU), the *Western World* acknowledged that they had the responsibility to condemn the invasion and help Ukraine’s officials and population in every way they can, without escalating the war even more. I will not discuss more about warfare, as is not my area of expertise, and instead I will continue analyzing the behavior of media and social media towards the conflict and its implication of the public opinion buildup.

Regarding the conflict in Ukraine, fact checking is almost impossible in certain situations and it’s difficult to assess the level of bias of the media coverage. It’s quite intuitive that the *western press* would be at least slightly biased towards Ukraine’s (supported by NATO) chances of making a powerful stand or even win in the conflict against the Russian forces. An argument that supports this statement is about the sources of the stories, as most of the times the sources are either officials from Ukraine, secret services from the NATO countries or people representing the external affairs ministries of the same countries. The morale of the people was always important in situations of crisis, therefore a biased coverage where *our guys are winning* is desirable. But this is the image that is painted mostly by mainstream media, whereas there is also random news, posts and articles that side with the supposed counterpart in this conflict. This is mostly the playing field of conspiracy theorists that call *official* narratives as being *faked*; on the one hand, we have the mainstream media that calls out the pro-russian publications for being conspiratorial, both about their content and about having people infiltrated in society as influencers to corrode people’s trust in state institutions, their leaders but especially the international organizations. On the other hand, pro-russians accuse the mainstream media of being corrupt and a *propaganda machine* for the neo-liberal ideology that is in this case represented by the United States of America and NATO. Both sides have created a lot of noise in the public space, leaving people rather confused than anything else. The concerns about post-truth in this situation are more than reasonable as people are going to believe whatever they want, but mostly, what is compatible with what they already know. But there is a crucial difference between the pandemic and the war, in the first case, we already had a scientific consensus and a consolidated epistemic authority to follow towards solving the issues generated by the virus; for the second case, thing are a lot more different, as there is no true epistemic authority on the matter, the exposure towards ideology and clash of values make it a gray zone and the discussion on *facts* becomes intricate.

Even if we try to turn a blind eye on the media biases and ideology issues, we will see that it still blunders on presenting the *news* and *facts* about the conflict. When we want to verify a story – in general, not only war-related – we usually try to track the source of the information and also if we can find out if that story had been covered by more media sources that are considered to be *reliable*. As I stated before, the internet can be host to the wildest of conspiracy theories and alternative narratives, as it’s hard to disprove them, especially in a short time. This type of narrative peaked at the beginning of the armed conflict, when the *sensational* factor was really high and also the event was covered by all the media, therefore people had a hard time distinguishing genuine news from disinformation, as a *storm* of information kept heading their way. As people started to get a grasp on the situation, less *sensational* narratives were being released on the *market of ideas,* and instead, the *news* started to be less *altered*, only to appeal certain ideology-like values and beliefs, and stir emotions into the audience. But even the mainstream media has made blunders regarding the display of some news. One practice that I find troublesome regarding the mainstream news channels is that they bring different guests to share their opinion, even though they don’t have any expertise on the matter and their interventions are just a manifestation of partisanship – this doesn’t happen all the time of course, but it happens frequently enough to become an issue. But this is something we can expect in the post-truth era, as we were shown that is easy to go into ridiculousness when some journalists and an expert in armed conflict commented on a scene from a video game as if it was footage from Ukraine.[[5]](#footnote-5) This example displays perfectly how low even the mainstream media will go with the standards of critical thinking in order to *sell* as much *news* as they can.

**Ending notes**

The main purpose of this article was to display how the evolution of media and the transition towards post-truth has been damaging towards the public opinion build up and both individual and collective behavior. The downfall of people’s critical thinking that has begun as soon as they started surrounding themselves only by the news and information that is in accordance with what they already know and believe. This lack of getting ideas challenged, doubled by the partisan media’s activity has disturbed the traditional media in such a manner that people take everything they read as being true, disregarding any contrary opinion – even those of scientific journals, which are, usually, the result of scientific research (basically, people are choosing partisan opinion over facts). This situation can open the way for unreasonable attitudes and behavior which have the potential to aggravate crises and slow down the later rebuilding process. As for what is to be done, the sovereign states will have a hard time dealing with this as there is a thin line to cross towards authoritarian measures. As for the people who didn’t fell into the trap of counterfactual news and alternative narratives, they should act similar to a *whistleblower* when they get in touch with people who lack critical thinking, that believe and spread disinformation and try their best to diminish the phenomenon.

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1. The war in Ukraine, unfortunately, isn’t the sole on-going armed conflict in the world at the moment, but it’s the one that gets the most media coverage and attention of what we would call *international actors.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The armed conflict caused enough victims to be considered a full-fledged war, as we can see in the data available here: <https://acleddata.com/europe-caucasus-and-central-asia/analysis/> . [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Available at <https://www.oed.com/> . [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWoGbqlAAfM>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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